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# THE COSMIC KINGS

by Alexander Blade





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NOVEMBER 1956

# Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES  
NEW AND  
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling  
Editor



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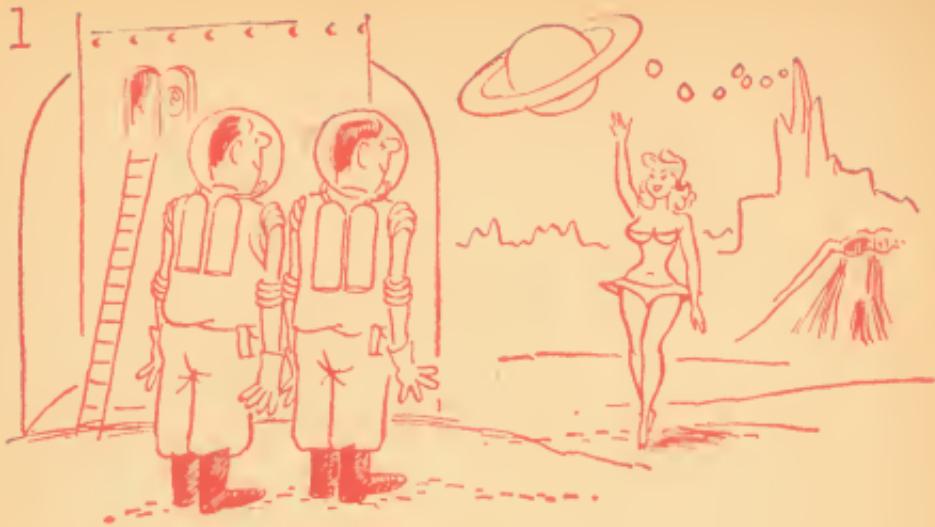
# The Editorial.....

ALEXANDER BLADE returns this month with a new novel of the starways, *THE COSMIC KINGS*. Alex has a habit of coming through with stories that are not only different, but packed with plenty of action and suspense. We don't know if there is such a world in the universe as he describes, but after reading the novel we're sure you'll agree that it would be quite a thrill to find one like it! That's why we get such a big kick out of science fiction. The adventure into the unknown, uncharted, unguessed at immensities of space. It's ironic that someday men will actually visit alien worlds, feasting their eyes on fantastic civilizations—ironic because we're doing it all the time in science fiction when science says it's impossible!—At least, impossible during *our* time. The old saw about being born a thousand years too soon hits home with most science fiction readers!

GOOD NEWS to pass along. We got a phone call the other evening from Dwight V. Swain. Dwight, as we may have mentioned, has been pretty well tied up with educational TV work at the University of Oklahoma, and thus hasn't had much time to devote to his science fiction writing. But we're happy to report that Dwight's caught up on his

academic chores and wanted to know if we'd like to have a new novel for TALES. We told him we didn't only want one—we wanted a half dozen or so! Happily, Dwight had the same idea in mind, so keep your eyes on forthcoming issues of TALES (and IMAGINATION too!) for the first of Swain's new novels. —To those of you who have enjoyed Swain stories in the past we know this is good news, and for those who haven't had a chance to read his work, you've got a treat in store for you!

BY THE TIME this issue hits the newsstands the World Science Fiction Convention will be taking place in New York City at the Biltmore hotel. (Over the 4-day Labor Day weekend.) If you happen to be in the New York area by all means plan to stop by and have a whale of a time. The convention is always the big science fiction event of the year, and every editor, writer, and true fan will be on hand to say hello. There'll be an elaborate program, and plenty of get-togethers day and night (who sleeps at a convention!) to discuss and enjoy one subject—science fiction. —We'll carry a full report on the convention in our companion magazine IMAGINATION immediately following the convention, so even if you can't attend, you'll read all about it. whl





Across the vast reaches of space Bryant fled from the Varkonid warships. There was one place of refuge, a forbidden planet ruled by —

# The Cosmic Kings

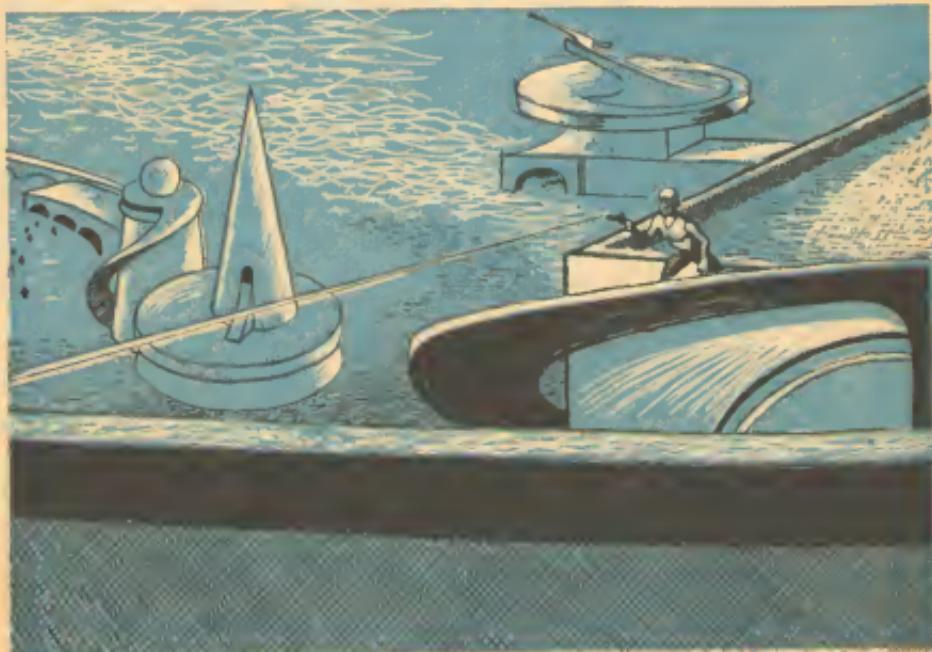
by

*Alexander Blade*

**S**ITTING HUNCHEDE and dazed with weariness at the controls of the racing scoutship, Hugh Bryant looked down at

the thing in his hand. His lucky-piece, that he'd carried since boyhood.

*"And fine luck it's brought me,"*



he thought bitterly. "*All the years, and now it all ends like this . . .*"

The scout-ship was in overdrive, but the compensator screens of the scanning device showed a visual image of space around it. On both flanks, there was nothing. Behind, the Greater Magellanic Cloud hung like a curtain of misty radiance against the inter-galactic emptiness. Ahead, seen edge on, the Rim of the galaxy clove the darkness like a flaming sword.

Bryant sat, fingering the lucky piece, trying to think. But his mind was too tired. He could hardly remember whether they were in overdrive or not. He had forgotten whether Feltrie, in the narrow bunk behind him, was dead or only asleep. He could only remember the huge fact of the pursuers behind them.

Behind them? No, all around them now. The ultrascope showed little red pips in a three-dimensional pattern around the scout. The pips were Varkonid fast raiders, under the command of a particular Varkonid named Grach Chai. The pips were death, closing in very fast and sure.

He wished he'd never heard of Grach Chai, or Varkon, or this doomed mission. He wanted to forget all the years of toil and danger out here on the frontier of the galaxy. He wished he were a boy

again, back in the magic place where he had found this lucky-piece. Back in the city that was all his own.

"*The city,*" Bryant thought. "*My city. If only I'd never left it. If only I could have stayed.*"

On the ultra-scope globe the red pips moved swiftly, closing in. The warning note sounded continuously. The vast wheel-edge of the galaxy blazed in incredible splendor. Feltrie — at this moment probably the most important man on the whole star-frontier — slept, or died, in the narrow bunk. Bryant dreamed.

Twenty-one years ago, and yet he remembered his city clearly. He had been very young then. His family had left that world of the red star when he was only fourteen, when the spaceport had to be abandoned because Varkonid raids had brought trade to a standstill in that whole sector of the Rim.

Bryant tried to remember how it had felt to be young, but he could not. He could only remember the wonderful place that he alone had found on that world. The buried city that no one else knew existed, the magic refuge where he could escape the restrictions of the spaceport colony and the watchfulness of parents. Down in that hidden city that belonged only to

him, he had lived. It had been his real world. The other was only something to be endured.

He remembered how he had hated to leave that world. How he had gone down into his city for the last time, how he had wandered through the streets, touching the walls, listening to the hushed echoes of his steps, looking at all the beautiful things he would have to leave behind. And how the sound of his own voice had echoed back to him in bits like broken silver when he cried, "I won't go! I won't!"

But all the time he had known that it was no use, because there was no food here, and finally he had had to get up and go out of the city, taking only one small thing from it with him.

He had it in his hand now — his lucky-piece. A bit of curved crystal set on a round metal back, and encircled by a tubular frame of the same white metal. A meaningless, useless thing — but a reminder of the lost magic of his city.

Bryant looked at it, dreaming. The warning note from the ultra-scope sounded louder and louder, and he gave no heed. Of a sudden, the pursuers did not matter.

For as he looked at the soft clear spot of light in his palm, his mind, emptied and purified by ex-

haustion, saw the solution to its problem as a thing of sublime simplicity.

"The city," he whispered. "I was safe there, from everybody. I'll go back there."

He would take Feltrie to the city and keep him there until Grach Chai and the Varkonides quit looking for him.

It was as easy as that.

**B**LINKING his red-rimmed eyes, Bryant began to concentrate on procedure. He missed Wallace, his co-pilot, astrogator, and side-kick on this half-witted mission, but Wallace was dead. Definitely dead, and his body was back on Varkon. Bryant was going to have to do this by himself.

The first thing was to feed the chart-designation numbers of the red star into the calc machine. He did this, being pretty sure that he remembered them right. While he waited for the coordinates he looked at the red pips on the telltale globe. The Varkonid ships had him completely caged.

Well, let them. He had his lucky piece. He had his place to go. He was unstoppable.

With a sort of low animal cunning, he regarded the speeding pips, and laughed.

The tape rattled out of the calc machine, neatly punched for

a new course. He left it there for the moment, and counted carefully on his outspread fingers the several steps of what he had decided to do, pointing each time with the other hand to the correlated object — overdrive master-control, normal manual operational control, tape, main bank scanner slot, overdrive master-control.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

He turned to the ultrascope globe, put his thumb to his nose, and wagged his fingers at the red pips.

Then he did Step One, slamming the master-control bar from Positive to Negative.

Automatic relays took the ship out of overdrive and into normal space, and that was as well, because Bryant passed out. There were ways to cushion the shock of translation, but Bryant had not bothered with them. When he could focus his fuzzy sight again the scout was moving along in open space at a speed which, relative to its previous velocity in stellar overdrive, was like standing still.

Bryant began normal operating procedure. Step Two.

Feltrie groaned. He was a small lean, man who looked like an amiable ferret. His head had been shaved to allow for a Varkonid disguise, and the hair was now

growing back in, spiky and grizzled. He struggled up and sat on the edge of the bunk.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he demanded. A sprayed-on plastic dressing on the side of his head showed the edges of a new wound. He held this tenderly with one hand and groaned again. "Kill me?" he added, as an afterthought.

Bryant pointed to the radar screen. "Look there."

Faint objects were appearing in a globular pattern, far ahead.

"They've run right over us. See?" He illustrated, holding one hand still in mid-air and passing the other over it very fast, making a whistling sound through his teeth. Feltrie looked at him closely.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," said Bryant. "Don't confuse me." He counted on his fingers again. Tape. Main bank scanner slot. Steps Three and Four.

He did them, placing the tape in the slot and listening to the subdued clatter of relays setting up the new course.

"Hang on," Bryant said.

Rockets fired in precise succession. The scout flipped over at a right angle to its former direction. Feltrie came out of the bunk and skidded into the bulk-

head, where he stayed. Bryant looked at his thumb, nodded, and threw the overdrive master from Negative back to Positive.

#### Step Five.

The Varkonides would come after him again, Bryant knew. Even a brilliant piece of strategy like this trick he had just played would not throw them off forever, especially not with Grach Chai in command. But they might be delayed enough so that the scout could reach the misty galactic arm toward which it was now headed, and which would have enough stellar debris to confuse the Varkonid ultrascopes at least temporarily. With enough luck, he might even reach Midway, the world of the red star, and get clear out of space before they could pick him up again.

Once on Midway, in his own beautiful city, he would be safe. Nobody could find him there. Ever.

Smiling grimly, Bryant sagged gratefully into oblivion. At the very last a twinge of doubt crossed his face and he tried to open his eyes again, but it was far too late.

The scout, an autopilot, raced for the outflung spiral arm in which an old red star drifted on its endless journey around the Rim of the Milky Way.

## CHAPTER II

SEEN AGAIN after an hiatus of twenty-one years, and without the roseate vision of extreme youth, the world of the red star was not much. It had not changed physically in any way. But it had stopped being home, and with a place like this it had to be home to you or you couldn't stand it.

Bryant and Feltrie crouched on the eminence of a low ridge and peered through the crimson dusk of noon at the landscape ahead. Feltrie grunted.

"Well," he said, "I guess it's better than that, anyway."

"Better than that what?" asked Bryant.

"Better than being taken back to Varkon." He shivered, trying to zip his thermo-coverall tighter at the neck. "But not much."

"Okay, okay," said Bryant crossly. "Go on back to the ship and give 'em a call if you want to. But leave me out of it."

Doubt was gnawing at him with increasing force. So he said truculently, "I'll be down in my city safe and sound, sleeping on a golden bed. I'll feel sorry for you."

Feltrie didn't answer that. He only said, "Hadn't we better get going?"

Bryant glanced back into the cliff-locked valley below and far

behind them. He had hidden the scout as well as he could there, but anyone who was really looking for it could probably find it. He might have put it into one of the hangars of the old spaceport, which he had passed over coming in, and which were only partly buried and at least partly intact. But if the Varkonides did come, that would be the first place they would look.

He squinted anxiously at the murky sky, with stars showing against the midday glare of the dying sun. He did not see any ships, but he was not nearly so convinced of the brilliance of his plan as he had been when he thought it up.

He had\* landed the scout only a short while before sundown, and since nothing that lived could survive a night in the open here, unprotected, they had stayed in the ship until the next morning, a period of forty-three hours by the chronometer. At interstellar velocities, that was a lot of time in which to be caught up to, and his ultrascope was of course inoperative now, so he had no way to check.

Feltrie was right. They had better get going.

They had had to waste some time waiting for the air to get warm enough to breathe, and then

it had taken them the rest of the long morning to climb the ridge. Midway was big and the gravity was heavier than they were used to on their home worlds, and they were loaded with every ounce of rations they could carry.

"There's water in the city," Bryant had said. "Plenty of it."

Or there had been, twenty-one years ago.

Feltrie had insisted on carrying all they could, anyway, which wasn't much. Enough to last them three days if they were careful. But it was heavy, too.

They started down the slope of the ridge, toward the great plain that spread as far as they could see north, south, and west of the worn-down mountain chain, which was no more now than a series of naked humps of rock. The plain was the color of old rust. If you watched it you could see it move, creeping and crawling sluggishly where the cold wind pushed it. When you walked on it your boots sank over the ankle with every step, and when you pulled them out the dust rolled back into the hollow and there was no sign that you had ever passed that way.

"Is it all like this?" asked Feltrie.

"Pretty much. There's a few other low stumps of old moun-

tains here and there, but most of it's like this — drowned in its own dust."

There was only one landmark. The tall signal pylon, the drifted domes and installations of the spaceport, abandoned these twenty-one years to the cold and the dark and the bitter winds.

"I suppose," said Feltrie, "that there was an excellent reason for having a spaceport here?" He was a Middle Sector man, and not familiar with this part of the Rim.

Bryant said, "The best. It's a halfway point, or was, for four main routes of galactic trade. This area of space is not overcrowded with stars, and this happens to be the most conveniently located system with a habitable planet."

They skidded and stumbled together down a long chute filled with rubble and rotten stones. The red dust rose up behind them in a heavy cloud.

"Habitable," repeated Feltrie. He pulled the hood of his coverall down until he could hardly see out from under it. "I suppose it's all in how you define the word."

"The air isn't poisonous, the gravity isn't crushing, and under domes you can live very comfortably." Bryant's tone was sharp, but his gaze was abstracted, turning more and more often toward the sky. The red sun hung huge

and listless, and the cold stars glimmered in a void the color of blue ink.

"Listen," he said suddenly, "if anything happens and we get separated, remember the entrance is exactly northeast of the pylon two and one quarter miles. Got that?"

"Got it. But what - - - - "

"It may be buried, but not far. The surface level had stabilized when the last section was added on. Scratch around till you find it."

He had done this so often as a child that it did not seem in the least ambiguous. But Feltrie looked at him and said,

"We just better not get separated."

**T**HEY REACHED the bottom of the slope. Their boots sank in the yielding dust. They began to walk heavily across the plain. From time to time Feltrie put his gloved hand against the front of his coverall jacket and felt the small bulge inside that was made by the case of microfilm spools for which all this was being done.

Bryant continued to look often at the sky.

The red sun sagged over into afternoon. Their shadows, black on red, lengthened behind them. The hollows the wind had made in the dust began to show pools of darkness in their deep places

and bars of crimson light on their western crests. The men were tired, but the spaceport and the tall pylon were now only three miles or so away.

In the end it was Feltrie who saw them coming after all. Bryant was studying his compass and trying to figure distance from the pylon, and Feltrie said, "Get down!" in a voice like a pistol shot.

Bryant got down. Flat. Feltrie dropped beside him. They lay motionless, except that Bryant turned his head so that he could see.

Two Varkonid cruisers were coming in, still high up and far away, catching the red light on their hulls.

"Think they saw us?"

"Hardly, at that distance."

Two men, tiny motes on a creeping desert. Infinitesimal. Invisible. Bryant burrowed deeper into the dust. He felt as big as a mountain, and as naked.

"If we lie still," said Feltrie, "I don't think they'll spot us."

They lay still.

Over the mountains the two cruisers separated and one swung north along the line of cliffs where they joined the desert. The other one came on.

"Heading for the spaceport," said Bryant. "I told you."

"That other one's liable to find

our ship, anyway."

"But they'll expect to find us near it. If there's no sign of us around the spaceport, they'll start combing the hills."

"Unless they know about the city."

"Nobody," said Bryant, "knows about that but me."

"Okay," said Feltrie. "But you've got to admit it seems almost impossible, a find of that magnitude - - - - -"

"What does a kid eleven years old know about things like that? I stumbled on it, literally. I found it, it was mine, and I never told anybody."

"Why?"

"Because," said Bryant simply, "I knew they wouldn't let me keep it."

The second cruiser went ripping over their heads and made a landing, in booming thunder and bursting flame, on the drifted but still solid tarmac of the port. Bryant smiled in spite of himself. You had to hand it to the old man. His father might have been emotionally dense, mentally inflexible, and shamefully henpecked, but he could build spaceports. He had built this one and kept it operative, and even after two decades of neglect it was still sound.

The cruiser squatted like a dark tower against the west. Bryant

recognized it as the command ship, Grach Chai's own. Small black figures came out of it and spread quickly among the various domes.

The wind blew stronger. The red dust rolled over the two men, blending their drab coveralls more closely into the landscape. Bryant began to feel the cold in spite of his heated suit. After a while he began to shiver.

"Won't the so-and-so ever go?" snarled Feltrie through chattering teeth. He was referring to Grach Chai.

"He's thorough," Bryant said. "Very thorough."

"Suppose they decide to stay there?"

"Why should they?" Bryant snapped. But he peered at the sun, growing redder and more enormous as it sank. The dust blew into his eyes and gritted in his mouth. He began to calculate the exact distance and direction to the city entrance from the pylon. They would not have any margin for mistakes. They would have to find it pretty quickly on the first try, or not at all.

THE DARK FIGURES moved busily through the extensive installations of the port. Bryant watched them with a bitter and active hatred. Anti-social elements like the Varkonides might be pos-

sible these days only in the frontier sectors along the Rim, but no matter how archaic and improbable they might seem to Inner Sector dwellers and the extremely distant Galactic Council, they were a constant, daily, and painfully real threat to the people of the Rim.

You couldn't call the Varkonides pirates, because they were an homogenous race and culture, and acts of violence against the property of other peoples was a part of their culture-pattern and a command of their religion.

You couldn't call them a warlike aggressor and whistle up the forces of the United Navy to deal with them, either, because they did not attack in large bodies, nor with any idea of conquest.

They were masters of the hit-and-run raid. Some fool in the forgotten past had taught them how to build spaceships, and they had taken to space like young eagles to the air. They had had a perfectly beautiful time of it until the advancing tide of civilization began to make them trouble.

Seventy years or so ago they had run head on into a Frontier Civilian Defense Committee, operating with no official sanction but with a great anger, and the Varkonides had been driven right off their home planet of Varkon, and right off the edge of the galaxy.

In a few decades people had forgotten all about them, and trade flourished along the Rim. Then, from a new Varkon somewhere in the Magellanic Cloud, the Varkonides had come forth refreshed and strengthened, to prey like happy wolves on the haunts of men. Grach Chai was one of their most noted captains, and Bryant had brushed with him before.

Bryant wondered what Feltrie must be thinking, lying there with those micro-films clutched to his chest. With Bryant and the late Bud Wallace to do the flying, he had spent months in the island archipelago of stars, looking for Varkon. When it was found he had actually landed there and taken pictures of the defenses. The current Frontier Committee had paid Feltrie a very large sum to do this, and now they would have enough dope on the Varkonides to give them another decisive lesson — perhaps drive them out of the Cloud and right on to Andromeda — if they ever got the films and the additional information stored in Feltrie's battered head.

Bryant guessed that he was probably thinking what the Varkonides would do to him if they got him back. And he was probably thinking that they would not rest until they did get him back. They couldn't afford to. Not if

they wanted to go on living on the fat of the Rim without ever getting hit back. Not if they wanted to go on living, period.

The rim of the sun touched the horizon. It had become dreadfully cold. The air was perfectly dry. It cut like a sharp knife into nose and throat and lungs. Bryant wept with the pain of it, and the tears froze on his dusty cheeks.

The Vorkonid search-parties began to return to their ship.

In an agony of cold and impatience, the two men waited.

The cruiser took off, in a roll of thunder and a flash of flame. It headed north toward the mountains.

The men rose stiffly and began to run.

The sun sank lower and the light died. Bryant tried to watch the pylon, almost indistinguishable now in the hazy redness, and the compass in his hand all at the same time. He was very tired and very cold. He was afraid. The darkling plain spread whispering around him, infinite and sad. He did not think he would be able to find one particular point in it, without light or time to search.

Feltrie was not asking any questions now. It was as though he did not want to hear the answers.

Blinking, straining his vision against the wind and the last dusk,

Bryant made one final sighting on the pylon and put his compass away.

"It ought to be here," he said.

They looked at the blowing dust, at their feet that seemed to be wading in dark blood.

Nothing.

"Spread out a little bit," said Bryant. "Look for it. Dig!"

They scabbled and scrambled on all fours like two shambling dogs, pawing in the dust.

The sun sank. The last vague afterglow vanished. The plain turned black and the stars burned like diamonds in the sky, scattered and remote. It was night.

Bryant's freezing hands felt something solid underneath the dust.

"Here," he said. "Here it is. Dig."

They scooped the dust away, flinging it wildly into the black wind.

"That's enough," Bryant panted. "Here. They set these all around in a ring so you could find them easy - - - "

He pressed down hard on a raised bar. The blackness stirred.

There was sound, dim and muffled.

There was light.

A round section of metal lifted up from the plain, showering dust off its edges. A puff of warm air

blew across Bryant's face. He looked at Feltrie in the soft white light and laughed and hugged him tight around the shoulders.

"Come on," he said. "Come on in."

They stepped under the metal section. There was a floor, also of metal, and a thick central column with a control board on it.

"It works just like an elevator," Bryant said. "See?"

He pressed the small bar of the control, and the floor sank gently down a metal-walled shaft. The roof section dropped into place above them, shutting out the bitter night. Into warmth and brilliance they fell, into a chamber with unadorned walls and a single door.

Bryant took his lucky piece out of his pocket and kissed it.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said. He was laughing. "Didn't I? See, it's all right. We're home."

He flung open the door.

### CHAPTER III

ALMOST INSTANTLY some center of sensitivity in Bryant told him that something was wrong.

And yet there was nothing he could see.

He stood just beyond the doorway, with Feltrie beside him, and that in itself was strange, because he had never before come through

that door except alone. Suddenly he resented Feltrie, and he decided that that was the trouble. Nobody else had any business here. This was his place, and his alone.

That was a ridiculous attitude to take, he realized, after all the trouble he had gone through to get Feltrie here. And the idea had been exclusively his own. But Bryant was tired with a long exhaustion and a long fear. His nerves were pulled to the snapping point. His grasp on time and reality and common sense were highly unstable. He resented Feltrie. He couldn't help it.

The moment of return should have been his, all alone.

He walked slowly across the little circular court, paved in blue, to the gate of white metal wrought in a simple grille. The gate was open. No other hand should have touched it in the twenty-one years since he had passed through it for the last time. He tried to remember if he had left it open, but he could not.

Feltrie followed him through the gate, keeping behind Bryant, walking softly and not speaking. Bryant had talked quite a lot about the city during moments aboard the scout. Feltrie was a tactful man, and a reasonably wise one. He understood that the city was to Bryant everything that he had

lacked in his boyhood, the playmate and companion, the wonder and the dream. He let Bryant have his reunion as undisturbed as possible. But he kept close to him, and his eyes, inflamed with dust, peered watchfully, as full of suspicion as they were with amazement.

Beyond the gate a long straight avenue led between rows of buildings toward a distant plaza. The buildings were not high, three and four stories at the most. They appeared, from their mellow covering and the softened outlines of their ornamental carvings, to be extremely old. From the weathered look of the stone, they had already been old when the protective dome replaced the sky, shutting out wind and rain and frost forever.

The dome made a low vault overhead, no more than fifty feet above the highest buildings. The red dust covered it. Neither man knew by how much, but it was obviously deep, judging from how far they had dropped from the surface. To Bryant it was just the way it had always been. To Feltrie it was claustrophobic. He flinched from the thought of it. Almost in panic he looked at the thick supports that marched in file like soldiers behind the rows of houses. They seemed solid enough. So did

the plates of metal or plastic that formed the dome. He was only a little comforted.

The pavement of the avenue was a pleasant yellow. There were four main avenues in the city, dividing it exactly into four sections, and each avenue was a different color. The houses were not all of stone — some were of plastics or cement. They showed soft shades of rose and gold, green, blue, every color that was pleasing to the eye. Vines clambered over some of them, and shrubs and flowers grew in plots of ground watered from a hidden source underneath. But they grew rankly, choked, neglected.

Feltrie sniffed the warm, fresh air. Obviously there was a central refresher plant and pumping station. The light, which approximated that of a Sol-type star, came from a webwork of tubes that arched across the dome. It would, theoretically, contain all the normal sunlight components.

Walking behind Bryant on the yellow avenue, Feltrie had to admit that the city was beautiful. But he hated it. He hated the lowering dome, frail shield against a horrid death. He hated the silence. There was too much of it, a whole cityfull of it, intense and unbroken, so that the sound of their footsteps and their breathing was like the shouting of a crowd.

Bryant's face remained rapt and joyful. His gaze moved here and there, welcoming old landmarks and memories. But gradually, as he neared the oval plaza in which the four main avenues met, a puzzled shadow began to creep into his eyes.

The buildings that fronted the plaza were all white, severely simple in line and imposing in spite of their low elevation. A line of carved memorial stelae bisected the length of the oval. They too were white, and the effect of all this whiteness after the colored streets was stunning. As Feltrie moved closer to the stelae, he saw that there were human-like figures carved on them as well as text.

**B**RYANT LAID his hand on the first stela and looked around at the white buildings in the stillness. For the first time he spoke.

"It's just the same," he said, "and yet it isn't."

"Twenty-one years is a long time," Feltrie said.

Bryant looked around him slowly, wondering and sad. "It's just a city," he said. "It's not - - -" He hesitated, searching for a word. "It's not *mine* any more."

He felt a terrible sense of loss, that he could not understand.

Feltrie put it into words. "You

were fourteen then. Now you're thirty-five."

Bryant frowned. He shook his head again, and looked down at the bit of shining crystal he still held in his hand. His lucky-piece, the talisman that recalled the dream. He put it down on the stone beside him and sat miserably with his head hanging.

Feltrie said gently, "Hadn't we better find a place to sleep? I don't know about you, but I'm bushed."

Bryant sighed and got up. "Take your pick. Any house. They're all furnished. When the people left this place they didn't take anything but their personal belongings."

"Where did they go?" asked Feltrie. "And why? They sure left everything as though they intended to come back."

Bryant said irritably, "How should I know?"

He started off toward the mouth of the avenue that was paved in red. There was a particular house on the opposite, apple-green avenue, but he did not have the heart to go there now. That had been the core of the dream, his own house where he was master. He had brought things to it from all over the city, things that pleased him, to be placed and used as he wanted them, with no one to question or deny. Kid stuff, he thought. Feltrie's right, I'm older now. Old.

That's all.

They chose a turquoise-colored house near the plaza. It was pleasant and spacious inside, the interior surfaces done in pastel shades. There were metal jalousies at the windows to provide privacy. The sleeping chambers had solid shutters to provide night in a place of endless day. The furniture was simple, highly stylized, and quite beautiful. Everything was there except the personal things. There was no dust. It was as though the people who belonged there had just stepped out and would return. Feltrie was almost reluctant to appropriate one of the beds.

Water still ran in the conduits. Bryant had drunk it many times before without ill effect, so they used it lavishly. They ate some of their rations and then talked briefly, before they turned in. Feltrie insisted on standing watch and watch about, and Bryant finally gave in. They flipped a coin, and Feltrie got the first watch.

"Good," said Bryant. "Enjoy yourself." He stretched out on the yielding mattress. He was dog tired. He felt like a child that has just had a terrible disappointment. He wanted to sleep and forget the whole thing. But Feltrie said,

"What happens if the Varkonides find our ship and decide to wait there until we come back?"

Bryant cursed him. "Can't you think of anything good happening? I don't know what happens then. You figure it out, and tell me."

"Oh, by the way," said Feltrie. "I thought you might want this again." He was holding the lucky-piece in his hands. "Odd sort of a gadget, isn't it? Look, you can move the metal frame a quarter turn each way."

"I know," said Bryant. "But it doesn't open or anything." He took it and laid it on a low stand beside the bed. "Thanks. I guess I forgot it."

Feltrie sat down in a padded reclining chair, where he could look out the window.

Bryant slept.

He slept heavily, dreamlessly, at the bottom of a quiet well. Then suddenly he was awake, dragged up on a sharp hook of alarm.

Someone was close to him, whispering.

In a sweating quiver of panic, Bryant lay still and listened. There were two people whispering, and neither of them was Feltrie. They were very close to him, so close that it almost seemed he was hearing them inside his head.

Varkonides, Bryant thought. They followed us somehow. We're trapped.

—strangers, one of the whisperers was saying. *Not from Koth-*

*mar, certainly.*

A second whisperer, excited, forceful. *We must kill them, it's the only way. Now, while they both sleep.*

*No. Wait a while. Perhaps ---*

*Wait for what --- until they find Cyra?*

*But they are strangers!*

*It doesn't matter. Anyone who knows about the city is a danger to us. Let me kill them swiftly, before they wake!*

In one wild instinctive movement, Bryant grabbed the gun that lay beside his pillow and sprang half erect, ready to fire.

There was no one in the room.

## CHAPTER IV

THE CALM and steady light came with the gentle air through the open window. Feltrie, the guard and watcher, slept the sleep of the dead in his chair. The passage beyond the door was deserted. Everything was as they had left it.

The whispering continued, only a little fainter.

*Wait. The one on the bed has risen. He's armed. He acts as though he knows ---*

*Impossible, said the other whisperer. But still, take care, Belath. We don't know what power these strangers may ---*

Bryant's gaze fell on the open window. In the pale-gold wall of the neighboring house there was also a window. Its jalousie was partly closed. Bryant thought it had been open when he last saw it, and he thought now that a shadow moved behind it.

He sprang to the wall beside the window, out of sight of the watcher and out of range of a weapon. He reached out and grabbed Feltrie, who woke with a yell. Bryant dragged him away from the window.

"We're being watched," he said. "Be quiet a minute - - -"

The whispering had stopped.

"Where?" said Feltrie, blinking and dragging out his gun.

"In the next house. I heard them whispering. Come on."

It was not until he was half-way to the front door that Bryant realized the impossibility of what he had just said. But he didn't stop to wonder about it then. He paused, just inside the front door.

Feltrie, awake now, said, "They must have seen us come into the city, in spite of the dark. And if they know we're here, it's only a matter of time. They've got us like mice in a bottle."

"Sh-h." Bryant was listening again. Nothing. The avenue outside was empty. He suddenly turned and ran back to the rear

of the house. There was a mews here, running parallel to the front avenue.

Someone disappeared between two houses across the way.

"There! There," said Bryant, "did you see him?"

"Not quite. Just a flicker of motion. But - - - how did he look to you? Colors, I mean."

Bryant thought carefully. "About the same coloring as me, except the hair was lighter. He looked to be pretty naked except for a little short skirt and something over his shoulder."

Feltrie said, "Wrong color for a Varkonid. I thought so, too."

The Varkonides were a dark olive-green, and the crests they had instead of hair were barred and banded with splendid brilliance. Even at a glimpse you could not mistake them for humans.

The two men looked at each other.

"I thought," said Feltrie, "you said this was a dead city, and that Midway is a dead world."

"It is. They are."

"Then," said Feltrie, "if that wasn't a Varkonid, what was it?"

Bryant shook his head. "I'm damned," he said, "if I know."

Feltrie looked out at the innocent, soundless city. He sighed. "I suppose we'd better start finding out. And it won't be easy."

They went back to the sleeping chamber to get their long-range shock rifles. Bryant was frowning.

"His name was Belath," he said, "and he wanted to kill us. There's something or someone called Cyra that he doesn't want us to find. But the other fellow - - -"

"What other fellow?" said Feltrie. "What are you talking about?" He looked narrowly at Bryant.

Bryant nodded toward the pale-gold house. "I told you I heard them whispering. Belath was watching us. He was talking to someone else, who wanted him to wait. He said we were strangers." He repeated slowly, "Not from Kothmar, certainly."

"Where is Kothmar?"

Bryant shrugged. "Never heard of it."

Feltrie said, "Come here." He stood by the window and pointed to the window of the opposite house. "Now do you honestly believe you could hear two men whispering over there?"

"No," said Bryant slowly. "And yet I heard them. One of them, the older one - - - I got the impression he was farther away."

"You were dreaming," said Feltrie.

"I didn't dream the boy we saw."

HE WENT OVER and sat on the bed, feeling tired and

confused. Nothing had gone right. There was a curse on him, and on the city. He put on his boots, and zipped them up.

The whispering suddenly began again.

*I'm safe, Father, I'm all right, but they knew I was there. I think they saw me. What shall we do now?*

*I don't know. Come back, and we'll try to plan - - -*

That was all.

"Did you hear it?" cried Bryant, looking around at Feltrie.

"Faintly. But I heard it. Like right here in the room, like right inside my head." Feltrie paused. "Hugh - - -"

"What?"

"What language were they speaking?"

"English, I guess." Then Bryant said, "No, that's crazy. It must have been Universal, only people don't use that between themselves, in their own families. Why - - - I don't think they were speaking any language."

"Well," said Feltrie, "telepathy isn't exactly unheard of."

"It is for me," said Bryant. Earth stock, along with a number of other races, had always remained deficient in the esper abilities, no matter how hard they tried. Barring a few individuals, they were just no good at it. Bryant

ant himself was a telepathically as dense as a brick wall. He began to feel uncanny, as though someone had practiced witchcraft on him.

He jumped up and slung his rifle over his shoulder. "Let's get out of here," he said, and picked up his lucky-piece from the stand by the bed.

The lucky-piece was warm. Suddenly, startling as a shout in his ear, Belath's thought-cry echoed in his mind. " *Father, he's found me!* "

"*Break contact,*" said the mind of the other man. "*I'm receiving him too. Break contact!*"

There was a click - - - whether audible or sensed, Bryant could not tell. There were no more whisperings. He looked at Feltrie, wide-eyed, and Feltrie nodded.

"A quarter-turn either way," he said, "but it doesn't open or do anything. It does something all right, your lucky-piece. It's a telepath gadget."

"Nothing ever happened with it before!" said Bryant, staring at the thing he had carried since childhood, and had never understood.

"It never had anyone to talk to before," Feltrie said. "Our friends - - - Belath and his father - - - must have these gadgets too. Communicators. Telepathic communica-

tors, like little personal radios, only tuned to the mind, to pick up and boost the electrical impulses of your thought. How well was this world explored?"

Feltrie's zig-zag habit of thinking sometimes got ahead of Bryant. He was still busy with the implications of the communicator, and it was a second or two before the connection became apparent.

"The usual survey was run, I suppose. The planet's one uniform ball of dust, as I told you. No visible signs of any life at all. I don't suppose the surveyors bothered too much. It was so obviously a dead world, and they only wanted to build a spaceport on it. Of course, if the life, the population, was all underground - - -"

Feltrie finished for him. "They wouldn't have known there *was* any population - - - any more than they knew about this city."

Bryant shook his head dazedly. "I just can't believe it. Why wouldn't some of them have contacted *us*? We are here for nearly six years on the surface, building the port, using it - - -"

"They might not have known about you, if they always live underground. This city was deserted - - - maybe there isn't another one, an inhabited one, for thousands of miles."

"Then," said Bryant, pointing

vaguely in the direction Belath had gone, "how did *they* get here?" .

He looked down at the lucky-piece communicator again. Suddenly he began to talk at it, very urgently. "Listen. Listen, don't be afraid of us. We're friends. Friends, understand?" He projected the thought of friendliness as hard as he could.

"No use," said Feltrie, after a minute. "They've shut off their communicators."

"Well," said Bryant, "come on, then. We'll just have to find them the hard way."

They went out into the quiet street, moving cautiously, listening, watching the million blank windows, the corners, the doorways, everything.

They searched, and kept on searching. There was no way of judging time in this place. The light never changed, there was no dusk and no darkness. As a boy, Bryant had loved this feeling of foreverness. Now, searching through the city for someone who wanted earnestly to kill him, it made him feel caught in an unpleasant dream from which he couldn't wake.

They circled around to the other side of the plaza without finding anything. The apple-green avenue was in front of them now, and they could see far down it to where it ended in the circular drive that

followed the edge of the dome. Nothing moved.

"Which way now?" said Feltrie.

Bryant shrugged and turned back toward the plaza. "Might as well work back this way."

"You know they can probably stay out of sight as long as they want to."

"Yeah."

They walked slowly back along the avenue, keeping close to the buildings on one side, peering nervously and seeing nothing, straining their ears for a sound and hearing nothing. From time to time Bryant had tried to use the communicator, but there had been no response. Now he said,

"I've got a feeling we're being followed." He moved his shoulders uneasily. "You know what I mean? A cold spot, like someone was watching me."

"I know what you mean."

They went on a little farther.

Bryant put his hand on Feltrie's arm. "I thought I heard something."

They stopped and held their breath. There was nothing. Bryant shuffled his feet loudly, and then held his breath again.

A soft whisper of sound, like the drifting of leaves in a windy night. Only there was no wind.

Bryant spun around and ran between the houses, with Feltrie at

his heels. A curtain of vines hung over the wall of a mist-gray house. At one edge long tendrils swayed and the leaves were shaken.

"Around to the front!" said Bryant in a fierce whisper. Feltrie sped off. Bryant leaped to the wall of the house and flattened himself against it. Then he slid in under the curtain of vines.

There was a doorway, open. He listened. Something moved inside, light and quick, going away. He looked around the edge of the opening. The vines had overgrown the windows and the hall was dim. He saw a shadow in it, at the far end. He stepped inside.

The front door crashed open. Feltrie's rifle appeared, and a cautious segment of Feltrie's head and one shoulder. The shadow stood silhouetted in the sudden light. Bryant's eyes widened, and he shouted to Feltrie, "Hold it! Don't shoot!" He began to run down the hall.

The shadow whirled, stood poised for a single instant, and then rushed toward a doorway at the side of the hall. But Bryant was a little too close. He reached out and grabbed it.

## CHAPTER V

IT WAS A VERY solid shadow, lithe, firm, and extremely ac-

tive. It snarled. It bit and clawed. Bryant kept trying to soothe it, trying to hold it tight and still not hurt it. Feltrie came in and looked at it and grinned.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"Very likely," Bryant panted. "Please," he said, "hold still. I'm not going to hurt you."

He moved toward the open door, toting the shadow with him. It was a girl-shadow, and as the light fell stronger on her all the shadowyness disappeared, leaving just girl. Girl with cream-colored skin and blue-green eyes and hair that would have been dark brown if it hadn't had so much red in it. Girl beautifully formed, quite small, almost fairy-like, and bristling with fear and fury.

"Please," he said. "There now. Take it easy." He smiled.

She tore at him like a little cat.

Bryant said desperately, "What'll I do, Jim? I'm afraid I'm bruising her, but I can't let her go."

Feltrie reached over and said, "Hold her still a minute." She was wearing a chain around her neck, and from it, like a locket, against the breast of the yellow tunic she wore, hung one of the crystal communicators. Feltrie twisted the ring a quarter turn. "Now," he said. "How's that?" He kept his head pushed in close so he could hear too.

Instantly the girl's thought-stream rushed into Bryant's mind, and it was so wild with fear that Bryant was shocked.

"Oh, no," he said. "Please. Listen to me. I wouldn't dream of harming you. Please - - -"

He poured it on across the tumult of her panic, and gradually a look of doubt came into her eyes and she paused in her clawing.

"You're really not from Kothmar?"

"I don't even know where it is. We're both from other worlds." On a sudden inspiration he said, "We're hiding from enemies, too." He gave her a mental picture of Varkonides, colored by his own feelings into something even more hideous than they were.

She thought that over, looking from him to Feltrie and back again, searching their minds for lies.

"Why did you wish to capture me, then?"

"Just a little while ago someone was planning to kill us while we slept. We were naturally curious to know why. Is Belath by any chance your brother?"

She let her hands drop now. "Yes."

"Hm. And you're Cyra?"

She nodded. "He was only protecting me. We thought at first, of course, that we had been fol-

lowed, and Belath was determined that I should not be taken back."

"To Kothmar?"

Sadly, she said, "Yes."

Bryant smiled. "And what wicked thing did you do in Kothmar?"

"I'm a Forbidden Child."

Bryant shook his head. "I don't understand."

Feltrie, with his face close to theirs, was looking back along the dim hall. All at once he stiffened and said softly, "Hang onto her, Hugh. Don't let go whatever you do."

Both Bryant and Cyra turned their heads, following the direction of his gaze. A man had come into the hall from one of the adjoining rooms. Probably he had climbed through a window from outside. He was a slight, small man, but his face, in the reflected light from the doorway, was set and determined. He held a weapon in his hands, and it had been Feltrie's idea that as long as they were close to the girl he would not use it.

Cyra cried out to him. She used a quick staccato language that meant nothing to Bryant, but he could follow her thought quite easily through the communicators.

"Father," she was saying. "Wait, they're not enemies - - -"

THE MAN ANSWERED sharply, one or two words. He

moved forward. Then Bryant sensed motion on his other side, and turned, and saw Belath rushing in through the door just behind Feltrie, with something in his hand, upraised and swinging downward. The blow was already started and Bryant couldn't stop it. He could only shout and let go of the girl, and try to pull Feltrie out of the way.

It did not entirely work. The blow was made a glancing one, but on Feltrie's already damaged head it was enough. He turned white and went to his knees. Belath turned on Bryant, his handsome young face drawn out of shape with a kind of frenzy, but Bryant was already moving. He had flung himself headlong over Feltrie, his arms outstretched. They closed on Belath's sinewy waist and bore him over and down.

Cyra's voice sounded with shrill urgency. The man spoke. Bryant and the boy rolled in the doorway, half in, half out. Belath was a tougher proposition than his sister, and Bryant did not want to damage him, either. Out of the corner of his eye, as he thumped and floundered, he saw that the girl had got between them and her father, and that she was talking fast. The man was hesitant, his weapon partly lowered. Feltrie groaned and crawled out of the

way of the flailing feet, and sat against the wall holding his head.

Bryant got the boy flattened out and pinioned, smothering him by sheer weight. He looked up panting at the girl.

"Cyra," he said. "Will you tell your brother - - -"

"I'll tell him," said the man. He, too, wore a crystal hung around his neck. His manner was still wary, and hardly less grim than it had been. He told the boy to get up and stand quiet. Bryant released his hold, and Belath scrambled sulkily to his feet. His eyes, fixed on Bryant, were resentful and afraid.

Bryant bent over Feltrie, who said weakly that he was all right. Bryant glared at Belath, and said, "You're in an almighty hurry to kill somebody."

"He has a reason," said the man, "as have I." He still carried his weapon so that it could be used at a second's notice. "I am Phaon of Kothmar. Who are you, and what are you doing in Annamar?"

"Annamar," repeated Bryant. "That's the name of the city? I never knew."

Phaon's eyes narrowed. "You've been here before?"

"Many times." He explained, as rapidly as he could, when and how he had been here and why he had returned. "As soon as we can get

back to our ship we'll be gone from Midway. We have a vitally important mission to carry out, and it has nothing at all to do with you or Kothmar. So you have no reason to be afraid of us. Matter of fact, it looks for the moment as though we're all fugitives together."

Phaon said, after a minute, "Where is this house you say was yours in time gone by?"

"Right up this avenue, sort of a peach-colored house - - -" Bryant's thought carried a picture, all bathed in a loving glow, of the house as he had last seen it, the rooms as he had last arranged each treasure. Phaon nodded.

"Very well," he said, "I believe you. We were much puzzled by that house, where the vines had been trimmed from the windows, and the rooms arranged by an alien hand. We could not guess who had been here."

"Your people, living underground, didn't ever know about our surface spaceport years ago?" said Bryant.

"Oh, yes, we knew all about your spaceport, when you came and when you left," said Phaon. "But we didn't know that one of you had been down here in Annamar."

**B**RYANT WAS STARTLED. "You knew about the spaceport - - - about us? You came out

and spied on us?"

Phaon shrugged. "Kothmar is more than a thousand miles from here, and since our dome was sealed against the engulfing dust we have almost never gone on the surface. But we could watch you in our own way. We - - - most of us - - - were glad when you finally left."

"But why?" exclaimed Bryant. "Why didn't you contact us? You could have emigrated, in our ships, to another world."

"You don't," said Phaon, "know my people. They have no desire at all to leave this world. At least, not in ships."

"Not in ships?" echoed Feltrie. "But how else could they leave it?"

"There is another way," put in Cyra. "There is the Roving."

"The Roving?"

Phaon's mouth twisted. "The glory of my people - - - and their curse. It is what makes them content to stay in buried Kothmar. For it is what makes them kings of the cosmos."

Bryant stared incredulously. "Your people call themselves cosmic kings, and yet don't leave their city?"

Phaon nodded somberly. "Yes. And it is true - - - they *are* lords of the universe, in their way. It is why they will not leave."

"But *you* left?"

Phaon said, "I had to. My daughter is a Forbidden Child."

Again Bryant said, "I don't understand. What is a Forbidden Child?"

"Food is scarce on this world. Even with synthetics we barely produce enough to live on, and therefore a population cannot be allowed to grow. Each mating couple is told how many children they may have. We were allowed one. We had two. Cyra was the second."

"So?"

"So if she is caught and taken back, she will be sent to the House of Sleep. Destroyed." He made a sharp gesture with his hand. "Murdered."

"But," said Bryant, in absolute horror, "that's impossible. No civilized people - - -"

"Civilized people," said Phaon bitterly, "only think up a nicer name for what they do. Survival in Kothmar is not possible for too many people. Therefore the birth rate must be controlled. Otherwise, there would be too many, and all would have to leave Kothmar - - - and leave the Roving that is dearer than life."

He added, heavily, "My wife is dead, long before her time, but even that does not atone for Cyra. The child must be slain, otherwise more people would be tempted to break the law. We managed to lie

about her for years, but at the last census we were found out."

"And you came here?"

"I was determined not to give up my daughter."

"But a thousand miles," said Bryant. "How did you survive the nights, without a dome?"

They all looked at him as though they did not understand him. And Cyra said,

"Father was with the Department of Engineers. He knew all the old ways. We didn't have - - -"

Belath turned suddenly toward the door. "Listen. I thought I heard - - -"

They stood still and listened, and Bryant heard it too.

There were voices calling in the city, far and harsh and strident - - - the voices that a thousand star-worlds feared.

## CHAPTER VI

**B**RYANT'S HEART began to beat like a hammer against his ribs. The sweat broke out on him, first hot, then cold. He looked at Feltrie. A little color had come back into Feltrie's cheeks for a moment, but it was gone again now, leaving them ashen.

The voices called and answered in the distance, then, echoing, spreading out across the segment of the city nearest the blue court,

where the shaft was to the surface.

Phaon lifted the weapon in his hands. His eyes had a look of despair, but they were steady. "They've followed us," he said.

"Not you," Bryant said. "Us. I've heard voices like that before. Those are Varkonides."

"But how?" asked Feltrie. "It was pitch dark; they couldn't have seen us."

"They're from Kothmar," said the boy. "Of course they are." He began to look around as though there was something important he had to find. Cyra stood still, frightened but more composed.

Bryant said, "It must have been the light."

"What light?" said Feltrie.

"The flash of light from the entrance, when it was open. You could see that a long way off. The metal cover is so dull and corroded it looks like part of the desert, and the dust covers it up again anyway, so it would take them a while to probe around and find it. But they'd know about where it was, if they saw the light."

The voices rang under the low vault. There was an exultant quality about them, like the baying of hounds, at once harsh and beautiful. The Varkonides loved to hunt.

Feltrie said, "They'll drive us until we're penned in against the dome, and then they'll narrow the

perimeter, like that." He brought his two hands together as though he grabbed something between the palms. "The hell with a place like this where you can't even run."

"Listen," Bryant said to Phaon, "you've got to find somewhere to hide. They don't know you're here, and maybe - - -"

"Your thought carries no conviction."

"They're thorough," Bryant said. "They've got an instinct for it. And they'll loot, everything they can pick up or tear down and carry away."

He felt like a murderer. He looked at the girl Cyra, and he thought, I've killed the city and probably I've killed her too, and she's so little and pretty and already in trouble enough. Then he saw her give him a quick, warm glance, and realized that he had been broadcasting his private thoughts. He flushed, and then Phaon said,

"We'll have to go back into the tunnels. Quickly, before they reach this part of the city."

Bryant said, amazed, "You mean there's another way out?"

"All the cities are connected by a system of tunnels. Most of them are still operative. That's how we came from Kothmar."

Bryant said, "Let's go!"

THEY WENT, in a close little group, keeping to the narrow ways behind the houses. As they ran, Bryant questioned Phaon about their destination, and was given a quick, mental picture of a round, squat building on the other side of the amethyst avenue that bisected the city from the south as the yellow one did from the north. Bryant remembered it. He had not been able to open the huge metal doors, and there were no windows in the building to let him see what was inside. He had decided it was some kind of a power plant and probably dangerous, and he had let it alone.

"In the old days it was a busy terminal," Phaon said. "But my children and I are the first to use it in centuries."

"And there are other empty cities, like this one?"

"All are empty, except Kothmar."

They ran, and the cries of the Varkonides came nearer. Cyra began to falter. Bryant put his arm around her and pulled her on. They skirted the plaza, knowing that they would be seen if they tried to cross that open space. They came south of it, to the edge of the amethyst avenue, and this they were forced to cross.

"Wait," said Bryant, in the shelter of the houses. "I'll take a look."

He peered cautiously around the corner. He could see straight into the plaza, and down its long axis parallel to the line of stelae, and into the yellow avenue beyond. And there was a swift-moving line of dark figures, coming his way.

It was already too late.

He did not stop to do any thinking, because he knew if he did he would lose what little courage he had left. Feltrie was the important one. Feltrie and the girl. They must not be caught. He said as much, very briefly, and Feltrie protested, but he knew Bryant was right. Bryant unslung the shock rifle from his shoulder.

"As soon as you see us well engaged," he said, "run for it, and make it fast. I'll hold their attention as long as I can."

Before he could change his mind, he left them and began to run back toward the plaza, crouching low and keeping as much as possible behind the buildings. He tried not to think about how scared he was, but that didn't work, so he fixed his mind on how many Varkonides he was going to kill with his shock-beam notched up to lethal voltage. He thought about Grach Chai and how much he hated him and what he was going to do to him if he got the chance.

It still didn't work. He was scared. He was so scared he did

not think he could keep going, but he did. He reached the back of one of the white buildings that fronted on the plaza, and he climbed through a window into the lofty marble silence and ran in a sudden drumroll of echoes made by his own feet. He reached a tall window in the front and looked out.

The Varkonides were entering the plaza, lean olive-green warriors decked out in the fancy harness they loved so much that they would not lay it aside even in battle, gorgets and breast-pieces and wide girdles plated with precious metal and flashing with precious stones, and every last one of them stolen. Grach Chai led the party, wearing the flashiest trappings of all. They were laughing. They were enjoying themselves. They were looking around and pointing and thinking of loot even while they hunted.

Bryant shouted out, "Grach Chai!"

He pressed the stud of his rifle and fired.

He did not hit Grach Chai, who was already close to the first of the line of stelae; and who instantly took shelter behind it. The loose formation of Varkonides exploded outward from its own center, and within a second there was not a Varkonid in sight except the one who had received Bryant's shot.

Bryant dropped to the floor. The spitting hiss of the Varkonid rifles sounded from outside, and the window aperture flickered with dancing blue flame.

Snake-like, Bryant slid on his belly along the marble floor to another window. He sprayed what he could see of the plaza with a hard burst and then dropped again.

Once more there was the sputter of blue flame. From the sound and color Bryant could tell about how far the rifles were notched up, and it was not far enough. Not far enough to kill, just enough to stun. They liked to take their enemies alive. It was more fun that way.

Sweat ran down Bryant's forehead and trickled cold and clammy into his eyes. There was a bad taste in his mouth. Goddamn you, Phaon, he thought, you'd better get them there safe, or - - -

Phaon's thought came clearly into his mind. *We are making the crossing now.*

Bryant closed his hand on the communicator in his pocket. *Okay,* he thought. *I'll pin them down. Luck.*

The Varkonides would be expecting him to return to the first window. Instead, he rose up and blasted them again out the same one. He made this a good one, spotting his targets. Then he flung

himself down, but it was a losing game, and this time he didn't make it. A stunning shock caught him on the way. From light-years off he heard Phaon's thought, *We made it, we are safe across.* He thought there was a second voice, that said, *Live, Hugh, live! We'll find a way* --- He thought it was Cyra's but he was not sure.

He was not sure of anything except that the darkness was all around him like the sides of a well, and there was no bottom.

## CHAPTER VII

**H**E WAS STILL in the marble room, but he was no longer alone. With the first light that came back to him, Bryant could see a horde of dark, jewel-flashing forms, moving as in a mist. The light got brighter and the mist cleared, and everything jarred into focus, the sights, the sounds, the colors.

He was hanging by his wrists midway up the marble wall. His feet swung in free air, high above the floor, and above him ropes had been made fast to two widely separated carved projections, so that his body sagged like a tapestry from his outstretched arms. The vaulted room swarmed with Varkonides, busy, talkative, animated. He could see out into the plaza

through one of the tall windows where he had done his firing, and there the loot was already piling high around the stelae.

Goodbye to Annamar.

And to me too, he thought. It hasn't even started yet, and already I'm sick. Did the others make it, all the way?

A sudden clamor of thought-voices in his mind. *Are you all right, Hugh, what is happening to you, we are safe in* ---

*No!* he almost shouted. *Don't tell me, I may betray you. Stay safe. Get clear out of the city if you can.*

Phaon saying, *It is not my way to desert a friend.*

*Desert, hell, what do you think I did this for? Feltrie and your daughter are the ones* ---

One of the Varkonides noticed that Bryant was conscious, and yelled to Grach Chai.

The Varkonid chief was on the far side of the room, talking to three of his lieutenants. He turned at once and crossed the marble floor and stood looking up at Bryant. He was handsome. He was splendidly built, powerfully muscled. His smooth olive-green skin set off the gorgeous trappings he wore. His eyes were large, slightly slanted, and as bright gold as the plaques that hung from his ears.

"Bryant," he said, and smiled.

His teeth were pointed and very white. "Are you awake and ready to talk to me?"

"I have nothing to say," Bryant told him, slipping and slurring over the unaccustomed glottals of the Varkonid speech.

"Oh," said Grach Chai, "but you have. Bring a chair, there. Let him down. Fetch some food and drink."

It was done, so swiftly and smoothly that Bryant knew it had all been arranged beforehand, for some purpose of their own. Just the same, he was glad to sit and get away from the tearing strain on his arms and the feeling of helplessness. The ropes were not removed from his wrists, nor were they let go of for a minute.

"Go on, eat," said Grach Chai. "A man is nothing with an empty belly." He poured liquor into frail crystal glasses brought out of some looted house. "Here, drink up. Burn the cobwebs out of your brain."

He handed glasses around to his lieutenants, and they all drank, and Bryant drank too, without hesitation. The Varkonides were not poisoners. The liquor felt very good going down. He thought he would have a little more of it, not too much, but no food. Food did not seem at all a good idea.

"Why not?" asked Grach Chai, when he refused, and Bryant

nodded at the high wall, and the ropes on his wrists.

"I haven't got too strong a stomach."

Grach Chai laughed. He could look very pleasant when he laughed. He turned to his lieutenants and said, "Bryant complains of his weak insides," and they laughed, too. Grach Chai leaned forward.

"Listen, Bryant," he said, "a man who can do what you did must have guts of steel. Tell me, how did you feel when you were hiding in the Cloud, hunting for our base? Were you shivering with fright?"

Bryant thought back. That was the first time he had been clear outside the galaxy, and he remembered the wild heart-stopping thrill when they had left the last of the fringing suns behind and he had looked out into the vast, the immense, the unthinkable gulf that lay before him, with Andromeda burning like a mighty torch at the end of it and the farther galaxies scattered across creation like misty star-webs. Then he had looked astern and been stricken dumb with the wheeling blaze of his own universe, a billion billion suns all hiving together in a single swarm.

He had run the scout-ship far out into the black sea that lies between the island universes, and he had raised the Cloud from its

outer side, running in among its secret star-shoals from a direction whence nothing had come since God Himself walked that way, making the cosmos as He went. After that it had been a kind of game, to find the hidden world of the Varkonides without getting caught themselves. Not an easy game, either, in a region unexplored and uncharted, where you never knew what you would find beyond the next sun, or behind the veils of nebulosity. But he could not recall that he had been very much afraid.

**H**E SAID SO to Grach Chai, and the Varkonid nodded, eagerly. "There was too much else to think about, wasn't there? Too much to see, to experience, and too much excitement in the game."

Bryant was forced to admit that it had not been dull. He and Bud Wallace and Feltrie in their tiny minnow of a ship, lurking among the wild suns and tracking the great Varkonid sharks little by little to their home world, and then sneaking in where no sane men would have tried, to land Feltrie and wait for him and then take off again.

It was the take-off that had gone wrong. He and Bud Wallace had been forced to leave the ship to rescue Feltrie, and Bud had not made it back. But Bryant had got

the scout off the ground and gone belting out like a lunatic through the swarm of moons that fringed the planet. Since then, he had been running. And now he was caught.

"But you did it, Bryant," said Grach Chai. "That's the thing. You're a spaceman, a fighter. You don't belong with these fat pink men who make money on the safe worlds. You belong with us."

Grach Chai hitched his chair closer to Bryant. His eyes were like two hot drops of gold and the gold plaques swung from his ears, and the jewels in his harness dazzled Bryant's gaze.

"Listen, Bryant, I'll give you a ship of your own. We're raiding south along the Rim, far south into new sectors. We'll all get rich, and we'll have excitement enough for all, new suns, new worlds, new races, new women, new kinds of plunder. I won't ask you to go against your own friends. And you won't be alone with us, either. There are quite a few of your own race in the Cloud. Think about it, Bryant."

He thought about it. He thought about gold and glory and foreign suns. He thought about swooping like an eagle down out of the Cloud and running in to raid along the Rim, and he thought about a lot of things he would have been ashamed to put into words because

they would have sounded strange in the mouth of a civilized man. He thought that underneath he was not too different from Grach Chai. And before he could think too much he said,

"No. Time has gone by for that sort of thing. It's too late. You've already been pushed to Magellan. The next push will be - - -" He shrugged. "Out."

"Then we'll explore Andromeda together," said Grach Chai. "You're a brave man. Don't make me kill you."

Bryant looked at him. "I know what you want, Grach Chai. And you ought to know I won't give it to you."

The Varkonid poured more liquor for them both and sat back, shaking his head.

"You know I can't let Feltrie get away with those microfilms. We're not quite ready for Andromeda yet. Listen, Bryant. We'll get him. There isn't any way he can get off this planet. We found your ship. We wrecked it. If he shows on the surface, my patrols will pick him up. If he's underground - - - well, we can go as far as he can. And we will. This is an ideal base, Bryant. It has so many possibilities I haven't even begun to count them yet. So you can't help Feltrie. You might as well help yourself."

"No," said Bryant, and drank his drink, and sighed.

"And you might as well tell me," Grach Chai said, "who else is in the city."

Bryant barely controlled a violent start. "What do you mean, who else?"

"Bring that stuff here," said Grach Chai, turning around. "Yes, that." A Varkonid picked up a bundle some distance away and brought it to Grach Chai, who opened it and spread out what was in it for Bryant to see.

"These were found in one of the houses. Somebody - - - two or three people, apparently - - - had been living there, and not centuries ago, either. Not earlier than this morning."

Bryant stared at the little heap of belongings. He sent the thought to Phaon, *Now they know. They have the things you left behind - - -*

"Who were they, Bryant? Where did they go?"

Bryant said, "I don't know."

"Are there other cities like this one? Inhabited cities?"

"I don't know."

"There's one building my men haven't been able to break into yet." He described the round terminal building. "What is it, and why is it locked?"

"I don't know," said Bryant.

"Well," said Grach Chai, "we'll

find out." He looked at Bryant with genuine regret. "One last chance?"

"No," said Bryant, and his regret, too, was genuine.

Grach Chai shrugged. "Strip him," he said.

In the few seconds left while he still had the communicator, Bryant sent the frantic thought to Phaon, *Get out of Annamar, you can't help me. The Varkonides will take over this whole planet - - - you should warn Kothmar - - -*

He heard a faint, faint cry of *Hugh!*, and he knew it was Cyra. Then the strong hands had torn his tunic away and the communicator with it, and he was all alone, and Grach Chai said, "Pull him up."

BRYANT LOST TRACK of time. He lost track of practically everything, except the dark Varkonid faces swimming in a bloody mist below him, and Grach Chai's voice, and pain. Of this last there was plenty. More than enough. And yet the Varkonides doled it out sparingly, so that he should not have a surfeit of it at any one time and thereby lose the full savor. They kept him conscious long after he thought he ought to be dead, and Grach Chai's voice was clear and loud in his ears, asking, asking, always ask-

ing.

Why give your life for Feltrie? He's a mercenary, a hired man. He's no friend you're bound to.

Where is Feltrie?

Who are the others, and where are they?

Why be a fool, Bryant? You can still have that ship. You can still fly with us instead of against us. Come on, Bryant. The freedom of the Rim is yours.

Why don't you take it?

In spite of their skill and their tender care, Bryant began to slip away from them into unconsciousness.

"All right," said Grach Chai. "Let him down."

Bryant had no feeling left in his arms at all, but he felt the floor come up under his feet, and then he passed out entirely.

When he came to he was all alone. He could hear voices and movement from the plaza outside. The Varkonides were still looting the city, and probably Grach Chai had gone off with his lieutenants to make an assault on the terminal building. They would be back. They were not through with him yet. Not while he was alive.

He was bound now at both wrists and ankles. His clothes lay where they had been thrown, not far away from him. Among the litter the Varkonides had left be-

hind he saw a small sharp knife, the blade of which was stained with his own blood.

An idea began to shape dimly in his mind.

Sensation had returned to his arms. It was not a good sensation. Every nerve, muscle, bone, and joint was a separate and powerful agony. But he could move them. He began to crawl a little at a time to where the knife was. After a great deal of effort he got it between his teeth, and after a great deal more he was able to haggle apart a strand of the cord that held his wrists. Then he freed his feet.

Still Grach Chai had not come back.

Bryant pulled on his pants and tunic. The communicator was still in his pocket. The Varkonides had thought it of no value, and passed it by. Desperately he called out, hoping for an answer and afraid there would be one.

Phaon's thought-voice said tensely in his mind, *I was about to come and see if you were dead.*

*Where are you?*

*Below, in the service levels. The others wait in the tunnel. Can you walk?*

*I think so. At least I'm free. Wait - - - No, it's all right, just someone in the plaza. Which way?*

*At the back of the hall you will*

*see an archway. If you can get through it, there is a stair - - - I'll get through it.*

He almost didn't. His legs were like two pieces of wet string and the air kept turning dark around him. He still had the little knife, but he did not know what good it would do him if one of the Varkonides came in.

None of them did, and the million miles that lay between him and the arch were crossed at last. Beyond it there was a narrow hall that seemed to run for some distance on either hand, and the stair opened off it.

*Come down, said Phaon.*

He came down, staggering as fast as he could, into a place of empty marble vaults.

*Here the records of Annamar were kept, but they are under Kothmar now. The history of our world lies under Kothmar. There is another stair. Come down.*

He did. And now a door confronted him. He was in a space no larger than a coffin, and the way was barred, and from behind him, suddenly, impinging upon the blurry turmoil of his mind and sending a shooting chill through every nerve, there came a sound. A small sound. A soft sound. The quick scuffing of a shod foot against stone.

*Phaon! Phaon! he cried. I am*

followed. It was all a trap to make me lead them to you. Get away before - - -

THE DOOR OPENED and Phaon pulled him through it, and shut it again, and set the lock.

*They'll cut through it. With torches. A minute, two - - -*

*Let them. I know these levels. They do not.*

But, said Bryant despairingly, they are hunters.

He followed Phaon into an Annamar he had never seen before:

Here were vast avenues, not of houses, but of machines. They stretched away on all sides, mighty structures of metal, towers, cones, cubes, truncated pyramids like a fantastic city in themselves, and the bare rock under his feet quivered with the steady thrust and drone of power. Here and there shapes moved in the distance, and denizens of these streets - - - servo-mechanisms that kept the machines and each other in repair.

*This way, said Phaon.*

He turned into a street of linked dynamos, and then began to weave in and out around the bases of the huge structures, as one might dodge among houses for shelter. And even in his daze of pain and worry, Bryant found time for wonder.

*Why? All this power, everything in order, the city left just as it was - - -*

*It costs us nothing, Phaon said. The controlled-fusion reactor is practically everlasting, and all this is self-containing. It is a safeguard for us, in case the dome of Kothmar fails - - - as other domes have failed. We have a place ready to receive us, without delay.*

He paused and looked back along the gleaming avenues. *I think they have lost us. Hurry now - - -*

They fled, twisting and turning among the great machines, toward the entrance into the tunnels from which freight and supplies had been brought in the old days.

Phaon said, *I have taken counsel with Feltrie, and with Cyra. We must go back to Kothmar - - -*

Bryant caught his arm and pointed down an open space to a parallel avenue. *They're still with us. Grach Chai and two others, keeping abreast. They have more weapons, and they can run faster. We'll never - - - wait. Wait. Phaon! We have one advantage over them.*

He projected a thought ahead. *Cyra? Cyra!*

The answer came. *Yes, Hugh.*

*Give your communicator to Feltrie. Hurry!*

There was a brief silence, or rather blankness. Bryant and

Phaon dodged among giant ducts that carried air to Annamar. *How far now?* Bryant asked, and Phaon said, *Just there, on this side of the pumping plant.*

Feltrie's thought came blundering into his mind. *I'm here. What is it?*

*Listen, Jim. We've got to plan out something, and plan it fast.*

The door to the tunnel lay just ahead. On his right hand, the Varkonides moved, swift secret shadows behind the ducts. Once they were through that door, their way would lie open to Kothmar and the loot of a whole planet.

And the death of a world, not just the death of a city, would be on Bryant's soul.

## CHAPTER VIII

THOUGHTS, flying thick and fast through his mind. Plans. Alternatives.

*Okay, Hugh. When you come through the door you keep right on going. Cyra's getting ready. Just a minute now, stall around somehow, give us time!*

Bryant stumbled, a thing he found very easy to do, and Phaon caught him and bore him up, and they went on more slowly toward the door.

Belath was thinking something dark and sullen in the background,

but he could not hear what it was. Perhaps Belath himself was not conscious of it.

He could not see the Varkonides now. But he knew that they were there.

The door was in front of them, its metal grooved and scarred with centuries of use. Phaon put out his hand.

Now. Now! Watch out. Here we come, ready or not.

Steady. Play it straight, this is no time to get light-headed.

Ready or not, you shall be caught.

Oh, hell.

The door swung open.

There was a long lighted ramp beyond it, and at the foot of the ramp there was a slip or dock where a bullet-shaped monorail car lay waiting. To the left, beyond the car, was the terminal proper, a vast round cavern ringed with the mouths of tunnels, rayed with docks. From far overhead, dim and muffled down the lift shaft, came the thumpings and bangings of the Varkonides trying to penetrate the massive metal doors of the building above. Apparently they were afraid to blast lest they bring down the dome on their own heads. To the right was the arched darkness that led a thousand miles under rock and dust to Kothmar.

Nothing else was in sight. No-

thing living, nothing human.

Bryant and Phaon passed through the door. They went down the ramp toward the car, Bryant sagging in Phaon's arms and the smaller man lurching and heaving as he struggled with the weight. They did not look back. They did not seem to know that they were followed.

It was quiet in that rocky place. The distant noises from above did not disturb that quiet.

The hatch of the car was open. Suddenly Cyra appeared in it. She called out urgently in her own language, beckoning them to hurry, to get in, pointing forward meanwhile as though someone was at the controls of the car, impatiently waiting.

Grach Chai called from behind them. "Bryant!" he said. "Stop where you are."

Bryant stopped. Phaon stopped. They turned, and Cyra put her hands up over her mouth.

Grach Chai and his two lieutenants passed through the doorway from the service level, their shock-rifles ready in their hands, their faces alight with pleasure.

Feltrie stepped from behind the back-swung leaf of the door and fired, twice.

Grach Chai dropped like a stone. The man next to him dropped. But the third one turned, before

Feltrie could fire again.

Belath shot him in the back, from the opposite side of the door.

Phaon and Bryant came running up the ramp.

"They're not dead?" Bryant said.

Feltrie shook his head. "I did what you told me. But I don't see - - -"

"Grach Chai is more use to us alive. Help me get him up."

"Mine is dead," said Belath. He was staring down at the Varkonid, as though now that he had finally killed somebody, the sensation was not at all what he had expected.

Phaon explained, "Our weapons are old-fashioned and purely lethal. We have had almost no occasion to use them for many centuries, so we have not bothered to improve them."

HE BENT OVER to help Bryant with the Varkonid chief. Then Feltrie snatched something from its clip on Grach Chai's belt.

"Radio device," he said. "And it was open. There'll be others along."

They got Grach Chai between them and started to take him down the ramp, his long legs dragging. Belath still stood, staring down at the Varkonid he had shot.

"Come," said Phaon impatiently. "There is no time - - -"

Belath lifted his weapon and

covered them all with it. His face was quite stony.

"No," he said. "We're not going back to Kothmar."

Silence again, in the great round cavern, while the three men stopped and looked at the boy and then at each other, with the unconscious Varkonid a dead weight between Bryant and Feltrie.

Feltrie said, "I think he means it."

"I mean it," Belath said. "I don't care what happens to them in Kothmar. I care about my sister."

Phaon moved toward him. "Put that away," he said, "and come on."

"I won't harm you, Father," Belath said. "But these others have brought nothing but trouble to us, and they deserve to die. If you wish them to live, take Cyra and go to one of the other cars. Let the strangers go to Kothmar if they wish, but take us to some other city." His spoken voice went up almost to the breaking point. "I will not go back and let them kill her!"

Phaon said desperately, "I thought you understood. Things have changed. There is no longer any place on this world where we could hide. These invaders will find us wherever we go. Our only hope is to rouse Kothmar to fight."

"Fight?" said Belath bitterly.

"Our people, against these?" He pointed to the Varkonides. "It only means throwing ourselves into the same trap."

Cyra left the car and came running up the ramp. She had given her communicator to Feltrie, so Bryant could not understand her, but she spoke sharply to the boy, and Phaon said to Bryant,

"Go on to the car."

"No!" cried Belath, and fired into the air over Bryant's head.

"Oh, lord," said Feltrie. "What a time for him to pick to get difficult! Listen, Belath, did you ever hear of the Galactic Council? It resettles populations. Anyone who wants to leave Kothmar can do it. Including you, including your sister. There isn't any reason for them to kill her now!"

"I don't believe you," Belath said. He looked very young, very desperate.

"It's true," Bryant said. "If we live through this, we'll get you all away from here."

Phaon spoke to Cyra, and she turned to Bryant and smiled, a warm and fleeting thing. Then she walked up to Belath and took the tube-like barrel of his weapon in her two hands.

"All right," said Phaon. "Quickly, now."

Bryant and Feltrie dragged Grach Chai down the ramp and into

the bullet-shaped car. In a second or two Cyra and Belath followed, and now she carried the weapon.

Phaon pressed a stud and the hatch closed. On a simple control panel a setting had already been made. Phaon closed a switch and the car began to move. It picked up speed so smoothly that Bryant was scarcely conscious of acceleration, and almost at once the car had plunged into the blackness of the tunnel, so that there was nothing beyond the ports to judge by. But from the way a particular pointer climbed on the board he was sure that they were going fast enough. He tried to forget all about the black tunnel and the bulk of a planet over his head and all the things that could happen if some tiny detail went wrong.

There were big padded seats. He and Feltrie bound Grach Chai with great care and made him fast in one of the seats. The Varkonid was still unconscious and would remain so for a while. Bryant took over his shock-pistol and a gold-handled knife. After that there was nothing to do but sit.

THEY SHARED out their rations, eating frugally because food was scarce in Kothmar and there was still the need to conserve. Feltrie returned Cyra's communicator. They talked for a while,

about the Varkonides and what they would do, and the value of Grach Chai as a hostage. They talked about what this would mean to Kothmar, and about other worlds, and what it would be like to live under a sun and moon, in the free air.

"Not all of us are so far gone in the Roving that we are ready to forget all reality," Phaon said. "Some of us would have made contact with the men of the spaceport years ago, taking the chance that they would be friendly. But it was forbidden, lest Kothmar be destroyed, or the Roving stolen from us."

He shook his head. "Men fling themselves upon madness," he said, "and they will not give it up."

Bryant asked, "What is this that you call the Roving?"

"It is our life," said Phaon, "and our destruction. Because of it we never developed space-flight, and so were trapped here, a dying people on a dying world. Because of it we were able to survive even after we were forced underground, shut off forever from the sky. We do not need the sky. We do not need anything, except a little food. We live extravagantly, we are prodigals with life. Even these far-roving Varkonides are nothing beside us. And yet we die, never having really lived."

Bryant still had no idea of what the Roving was.

"You must experience it yourself," said Cyra. "No one can explain it to you."

"Do you enjoy it," he asked her, and she glanced sidelong at her father.

"Yes. Belath and I both --- we are young, and there is no other outlet for us. If it were not for my father, we would be addicts like the rest. But he has taught us differently."

The car rushed on, through the dark tunnel under the crust of the world. They were all tired, emotionally worn, mentally oppressed. Bryant still suffered from what Grach Chai had done to him. He looked at the Varkonid, and wondered why in spite of that he did not hate him nearly as much as he had before.

Feltrie said, "There's one big question that nobody has answered yet."

"What's that?"

"I think you said that the Varkonides had destroyed our ship?"

"That's what Grach Chai told me."

"Uh huh. So that leaves two Varkonid cruisers, supposing they don't call for more to come. Now, in the first place, I don't think we can probably capture a cruiser, and in the second place, two men

couldn't possibly fly it if we did."

"No," said Bryant.

"All right," said Feltrie. "So you tell me. Suppose Kothmar does fight, and suppose we even win --- this skirmish, anyway. How do you and I get off this graveyard planet?"

Bryant did not give Feltrie any answer to that question. He did not have one.

## CHAPTER IX

THE SWIFT RUSH of the car through darkness began almost imperceptibly to slow.

Bryant felt the nerves prick and tighten in his stomach. Cyra's face was pale and unhappy, and Belath held tightly to her hand. Phaon kept glancing at them uneasily. Now that he was almost there, he seemed to be doubting the wisdom of this return to Kothmar.

Nobody said anything. Grach Chai, fully recovered now, sat and watched them with his bright yellow eyes, alert and wary.

"Luck of the game," he had said to Bryant. "I'd rather be up than down, who wouldn't? But you have to take it as it comes."

Bryant and Feltrie arranged his bonds so that he could walk, but would be hampered from any sudden action. He seemed amused by this.

"Do you think I'm dangerous enough to take on a whole city single-handed?" he asked.

Bryant said, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see you try."

Grach Chai looked at him. "I wasn't wrong about you, Bryant. You bore up proudly when we had you. My offer is still good. And because I'm on the wrong side of the balance now, I'll broaden it to include Feltrie. Why not? The microfilm is more important than the man."

He nodded toward the others. "They're a poor lot. Let them go their ways. Free me, and the three of us can go back together."

Bryant shook his head. Feltrie shook his head. Grach Chai sighed, and settled back to his patient waiting.

The car moved slower and slower. It came out of darkness into light and the close walls of the tunnel sprang apart into a huge round terminal much like that of Annamar, except that it was larger. The car slid gently into its dock and was still.

Phaon reached up and closed the control board. He turned and smiled at Cyra and Belath, but it was only the shell of a smile, and there was nothing under it but fear. He opened the hatch and stepped out onto the dock.

Cyra and Belath followed him,

and then Feltrie came, and Bryant, with the tall Varkonid walking between them.

There was no one on the dock. The terminal was as silent as the one they had left, the cars lying idle in the slips, the mouths of the waiting tunnels dark and still. Some of them were barred, as though the way beyond was blocked or dangerous. Nothing moved, except themselves.

They walked along the dock to the central island. There was the shaft of a lift there, and they entered it, and were taken up slowly past the lower levels and into a building. There was no one in the building. They passed out of it and into the street.

For a moment Bryant felt that they had moved in a circle and were back in Annamar. But then he saw that this city was much larger, and the plants that helped to keep the oxygen balance were trimmed and tended, and the houses had a look of being lived in.

Only there was no one in the streets. And it was quiet, as quiet as empty Annamar.

"Is it night?" asked Bryant.

Phaon said, "No. If it were night, the shutters of the sleeping-rooms would be closed, and there would be some people in the streets."

Cyra said, "It is the time of the Roving. By law, certain hours are

for the work that must be done, and certain others are for food and sleep, and during those hours the central control is locked. Otherwise we would spend all our time in our other lives, and soon we would die. The mind and body can only stand so much."

"My home is not far," said Phaon. "Come and learn how we use our cleverness for our own destruction."

"But," said Bryant, amazed, "the warning. The Varkonides. Shouldn't we - - - -"

"There is no one here to warn," said Phaon. "You do not understand. This is the time of the Roving, and we six are the only souls in Kothmar."

They walked through the streets, across bright pavements and under the walls of colored houses. Nothing moved, and several times through the open jalousies Bryant saw men and women and even children lying as though they were dead on padded couches, and each one wore a crystal circlet on his head, a circlet glowing with an eerie light.

**I**N THE CENTER of the city, reaching almost to the highest part of the dome, there was a slender tower unlike anything in Annamar. At its top was a device shaped like a huge ring, and made of crys-

tal, and it, too, glowed with the same pale luminescence.

"That is the central control," said Phaon. "The transducer impulse is broadcast from it to all parts of the city, to be picked up and amplified by the individual receivers." He touched the small communicator that hung at his neck. "These were the start of it. When our scientists solved the problems of mental projection, it was only a step farther in principle to the Roving. Instead of projecting only simple thought, the transducer makes it possible to project the whole mind, the consciousness, wherever it may wish to go."

He turned aside and came to the doorway of a house the color of aquamarine. "Please," he said, "to enter."

They did so, and still they had not met a single person. "Isn't anyone waiting for you?" asked Bryant. "Police, I mean, watching in case you came back." He looked at Cyra. "I thought - - - -"

"What need?" said Phaon. "We are here. It will be known. In the meantime, there is no hurry. Nothing is done in haste in Kothmar."

He motioned them to couches in the main room. Bryant and Feltrie between them had kept Grach Chai informed of what was going on, and now he disposed himself with

considerable eager interest for the Roving.

"Do you mean," he asked, through Bryant, "that I - - - or rather the thinking part of me - - - will be able to leave my body and go wherever I will it?"

"With the freedom and the speed of thought." Phaon held up one of the crystal circlets. "This amplifier picks up the transducer impulse and transmits it directly to the brain, where the electro-cohesive matrix of the thinking personality undergoes a vibratory shift that frees it completely from the bonds of the flesh, for as long as the transducer continues to be active."

"Who knows?" Grach Chai said. "Perhaps we shall take this for ourselves."

"Perhaps," said Phaon grimly, "that would be the solution to the whole problem of the Varkonides."

He placed the crystal circlet on Grach Chai's brow and settled him on the couch, and pressed a stud. Instantly the circlet glowed. Grach Chai's face took on a momentary expression of stunned surprise, and then it became perfectly blank, remote and secret as the face of a corpse.

"Are you ready?" Phaon asked.

Bryant glanced uneasily at Feltrie, and then they both said. "I guess so." They lay back on the couches. Cyra brought a circlet and

put it on Bryant's head. It felt cold against his flesh. She smiled and said, "It is quite safe." She pressed the stud.

Bryant felt himself caught and flung away in a rush of cosmic wind. Cyra vanished. Everything vanished. He raced headlong through oblivion, and then there was light again, and he hung poised and weightless, bodiless and free, above the surface of a world.

The world was old and rusty. On a wrinkled red plain he saw a spaceport with two black cruisers on it, and in a fold of the humpy hills there was the wreckage of a little ship. The world was Midway. The ancient sun brooded in the sky, remembering the days of its hot youth. There was no sign of Annamar or Kothmar or any other place of life. The matrix of energy that was, or had been, Bryant found little interest in it.

He turned outward and began to rove.

He could see the scattered stars now as he had never seen them. He could perceive them as suns, from the outside, just as he had before, but he could also perceive the forces that made them live. He could perceive the stripped and primal particles of matter, and he could follow them as they surged through the roar and thunder of the solar furnace, beaten and ham-

mered into new substances and torn apart again with raving bursts of energy. It was unthinkable terrorifying and magnificent. Fascinated, he hovered near a great blue star and watched for - - - how long? There was no time. Seconds, centuries. Then he wearied of it and drifted on.

The rim of the galaxy wheeled beneath him and was gone. Ahead there was a vast dark, and at the end of it - - - as he had seen it before in some other half-remembered existence - - - was another galaxy, burning bright.

Andromeda.

He wanted to go there.

He went.

Again there were suns and moons and planets and great looping nebulae and the sinister blacknesses of dust-clouds. He fluttered moth-like from star to star, and then an ice-blue planet caught his fancy. He dropped toward it, and it was all watery, with only islands of low green land. The seas were very beautiful, silvery and warm under a milky sun. He went low to the water, and something moved in it, and he entered into that something and became one with it, a sharer in every thought and emotion, but possessing no power to influence.

He swam in the warm sea. His body was sleek and very powerful,

covered with a close pale fur. He was hunting. He was not hungry. He was not seeking food. He was hunting for an enemy.

**H**E SWAM TOWARD the green archipelago. When he was on the surface he breathed air through his nostrils. When he sank below, slipping through a forest of tall bright weed, he closed his nostrils and used gills. His swift motion through the water was a sensuous pleasure, almost like flying. He could walk erect on the land, but he did not like that.

He moved stealthily in the shallows until he saw someone stir in the fringes of the silver-green, silver-pink forest that grew beyond the beach. Then he became excited, and his muscles quivered with the pleasure of what was coming. He approached the beach, quite silently, and left the water. His hand closed on a heavy stone.

The enemy was in the forest. The enemy had left behind the warm places of the sea. The enemy built his house on the naked land. The enemy had forgotten how to use his gills. The enemy hardly ever swam. The enemy was evil.

The enemy was small. It was only a cub, carrying a little basket of plaited rushes. It looked up at him as he rushed, and made a thin screaming, and was still. It

was small, but it was the enemy, and to kill the enemy was good.

He looked down at it, and then he dropped the stone and glanced from side to side, and slunk back to the water.

Behind him the parents of the cub came crying to the edge of the water, but they stopped there. He sank out of sight and swam away. He had killed an enemy. It was good to kill what was wrong and unnatural, what left the mother ocean to stand tall on the land. It was good.

He swam deep, deep in the ice-blue fathoms. There was a valley there, filled with silver bubbles, bright with slender weeds. There was a house there that he had built out of coral stone. He had an evil thought as he swam toward it. He thought the sun was let in upon it, and the weed was shrivelled black, and the tall parents of the cub were tearing down the stones.

He swam in terror toward the valley.

Bryant left him. He - - - his mind - - - were swept on into the vast star jungle, past smoking suns, brooding blackness of clouds, a cluster - - -

He was on a world of that cluster, on a high hill, and it was sunset. He and his fellows - - - furred, grotesque, mighty - - - waited. The

sun dropped. The sky darkened. The million stars of the cluster sky exploded like fireworks into being, and Bryant and his fellows raised their arms and howled.

He swept away from that, on toward another world, and another, so quickly that the worlds, the scenes, the bodies he briefly lived in, were like fast-flicking frames of a high-speed film.

Worlds of crystal in which he too was crystalline and sessile but thinking; worlds where he was a barbarian riding a strange, high beast in headlong charge down shadowy gorges; phantasmagoria of planets of nightmare and of beauty, serene loveliness and horror undreamed; terror and greed and lust and joy . . . .

Suddenly, the same cosmic wind that had caught him up before caught him now. Andromeda dwindled and became a distant flame, and then was lost entirely in the sullen glare of a red sun. A wrinkled desert rushed up to meet him, fast, fast - - -

**H**E STARTED UP with a cry. Cyra stood beside him. He was back in Phaon's house. Feltrie and Grach Chai were rising on their couches, too, the circlets dull and dead around their brows.

They looked at each other with dazed eyes.

"I was an emperor," Feltrie said. "Under a double star, in the heart of a golden nebula. We weren't human. It was terrible, and wonderful. I had only just started - - -"

Phaon said, "The time is over."

Bryant said, "Good God, no wonder your people think themselves kings of the cosmos!"

"Where did you go?" asked Feltrie.

"I went to Andromeda."

"What did you find there?" said Grach Chai softly.

"Death. Beauty. Fear."

"What else is there?" The Varkonid shivered all over, and his eyes were very far away. "Now I see why these people care for nothing else. To have the whole cosmos open to you - - - universe after universe - - - a man could not come to the end of it if he lived ten thousand years - - - and with no danger, no effort, and always something new. My God, Bryant, if my people were to get hold of this - - -"

He sprang up. He sprang toward Phaon, who was closest to him. But he had forgotten that he was hobbled, and he fell. For a moment his face was a mask of pure ferocity. Then his attention, and everyone else's, was brought sharply to the door, where a file of men were entering.

There were eight of them, and

one in the lead. The eight had weapons of the sort Belath had used on the Varkonid back in Annamar. The ninth was apparently an official.

He spoke to Phaon, looking with surprise and alarm at the strangers. He spoke very sharply, and Phaon showed his teeth in a bitter smile.

"He reproaches me," he said to Bryant, "for compounding my other sins by bringing strangers into Kothmar, a thing which is utterly forbidden. What he, and the Council of Kothmar, do not yet realize is that the end of one time has come, and the beginning of another. They are no longer in control."

It took exactly one hour and sixteen minutes by Bryant's wrist chronometer to prove that Phaon was wrong.

## CHAPTER X

THE COUNCIL of Kothmar was small. It was composed of old men and old women, who knew a few simple basic truths and would not be turned from them. Things were as they were. Things would remain as they were. The ways of Kothmar were the right ways, and there were not going to be any others. The Council would not permit them.

They reminded Bryant strongly of the Andromedan who had chosen

to cling to his gills, and who would not permit anyone else to do otherwise if he could help it.

The Council was not surprised that Phaon had returned. They had been expecting him. There was no food in the abandoned cities, and no survival on the surface, so eventually anyone insane enough to run away from Kothmar was forced to return. There was no escape from justice.

Cyra was to go, as the law required, to the House of Sleep. But now she would not go alone. The strangers would accompany her. Strangers were forbidden in Kothmar, or the safety of the city, and there was no food for them and no place in the economy.

"But what about the Varkonides?" cried Bryant, pointing to Grach Chai. "His people. We brought him to you a captive, so that you would have a bargaining point - - - aren't you going to use him?"

"We do not need him," said the Speaker of the Council.

"Do you think you can just ignore these people? Pretend they don't exist?" Bryant was furious. He looked around the semi-circle of councillors, cosmic kings in their other lives, possessing the universes, but in this life possessing nothing but stubborn complacency. "The Varkonides," he said, "will

tear down the city over your heads while you lie dreaming on your couches."

"How will they reach us?" said the Speaker. "It is a simple matter to destroy the tunnel."

"You'll be cut off from Anna-mar."

"There are other cities."

"They'll search the planet till they find you. They'll be after loot and vengeance both, if you kill Grach Chai."

"Let them search," said the Speaker. "They will weary of it in time."

And Bryant could see that that might very well be true. Desperately, he said,

"Then you won't even help us to complete our mission? I've explained to you what it means to the Frontier - - -"

"This is not our affair. We do not feel obliged to become involved in it."

"All right," said Bryant disgustedly. "But at least let us go. Give us surface armor and weapons, and we'll take our chances." He put his arm around Cyra. "We'll take her with us. There's no need to kill her. There are plenty of worlds beyond this one, even without the Roving."

The Speaker of the Council said with obstinate patience, "Our law must be upheld for the safety of

the community. It is obviously impossible to let you go upon the surface. If even one of you survived, the location of Kothmar would be known to everyone. No. There is nothing to fear in the House of Sleep, no pain, no ugliness. It is over quickly."

He turned to Phaon, "And you, who are chiefly to blame for all this, will go too. You have always been a troublemaker, Phaon. We cannot be patient any longer."

Phaon said savagely, "Is this your idea of justice? What about the people of Kothmar? Shouldn't they have something to say about how their lives are ordered? Perhaps some of them would prefer to leave, and live like men in the open. Have you any right to stop them?"

"Yes," said the Speaker, "as we did before, and as we will do whenever it is necessary, for the safety and preservation of Kothmar. And I greatly fear, Phaon, that your son will follow you in time to the House of Sleep, because of your upbringing. But for the present we will let him live. And now - - -"

"You, sir," said Bryant, "are a sanctimonious murderer. And the day will come - - -"

For the first time a flash of genuine anger showed in the old man's face.

"You were not asked to come

here," he said. "You forced your way in, unwanted. Suppose I forced my way onto your world and told you that your traditions of centuries, your whole way of life, must all be overthrown in a minute, and my way adopted instead? How would you treat me?" He spoke to the guard. "Let the sentence be carried out."

HE TURNED AWAY and began to discuss with the Council the most effective means of blocking the tunnel to Annamar. Belath had moved back into an alcove, almost out of sight, his face very white and stony. The guard formed around the five who were condemned and marched them out of the marble council hall into the plaza.

This was much larger than the plaza at Annamar, and the tower of the Roving rose in the center of it. Feltrie looked at it and said, "I guess you can't blame them. I mean, if I had that, I wouldn't risk losing it if the whole galaxy fell in pieces around me."

Bryant thought that that was true. Even one life is so precious that a man will go to any lengths to keep it, and the folk of Kothmar stood to lose not one but many lives, if anything happened to upset their ways.

They passed the tower in som-

ber silence, walking close together within the circle of the guard. They all seemed stunned by what had happened, and Bryant was unable to grasp the fact that he was actually on his way to execution. He looked in a sort of dumb horror at his feet, marching steadily toward death; and then at Cyra. And she looked at him with eyes that shone with tears, and whispered, "I am sorry - - -"

In a doleful tone suitable to a condemned man, Grach Chai said, "The boy is following us behind the buildings. I think he has a weapon. If you could arrange it to free my hands - - -"

His ankle bonds had already been removed by the guard, when they took him from Phaon's house. Bryant saw Feltrie's eyes brighten, and his own spirits rose. It didn't look like much of a chance, but it was better than perishing meekly like so many sheep in this alien city.

The guards did not wear communicators, but Phaon and Cyra still had theirs, so they could talk to Bryant. He gave them some rapid mental instructions, and then said in a sad tone to Grach Chai,

"When we pass the corner of this building, the girl will faint. Catch her."

They walked on the white paving of the plaza, and the people of

Kothmar passing by looked at them from a distance, curious but aloof. The tower rose up toward the dome, the great crystal tube that crowned it dull and lightless now. The kings of the cosmos were only men and women now, busy with the day's work. He wondered where they had all been, and what wonders they had seen, and what splendid journeys they were looking forward to when the crystal glowed again.

They passed the corner of the building, and Cyra faltered and fell against Grach Chai.

He caught her as well as he could with his bound hands, and Bryant turned instantly and reached out for the girl. There was a brief confusion, during which Grach Chai's hands were hidden by Cyra's body, and Cyra's hands by Bryant. When the guard, which had been forced to halt, got them separated again, the Varkonid's hands were free.

He brought them smashing into the astonished face of a guard, and then things happened fast. Cyra dropped to the ground out of harm's way. Bryant landed a terrific uppercut on the jaw of the nearest guard. He grabbed for the man's weapon as he went down, missed it, and saw Feltrie grapple with a guard and go rolling with him on the ground, beating the man's head against the marble

paving. Close by Bryant's shoulder Grach Chai whooped out a war-cry and sent the little men of Kothmar staggering under his blows. Bryant knocked another one down himself and then bent again for the weapon. For this first moment of surprise, guard and prisoner were too closely entangled for weapons to be used by those not engaged, but this would not go on for long. Bryant hoped that Belath would see his cue and take it.

He did. Even as Bryant got his hands on the unfamiliar weapon he heard Belath shout, and then a missile went singing over his head and into the breast of a guard who had backed off and sighted on Phaon. The man fell, and his shot went wild, catching one of his fellows. Phaon snatched his weapon and crouched on one knee, pumping shots with such terrible grimness and inaccuracy that Bryant made him stop and take Cyra to where Belath was running toward them down the open way between buildings. There were now four guards left on their feet. Bryant fired at them and one fell. The other three dropped their weapons and ran.

Feltrie and Grach Chai armed themselves, and they turned to join Phaon. Bryant realized that the advantage they had had was only partly due to their superior size

and strength. It was chiefly because the men of Kothmar had never actually fought before and were horrified by the violence of it.

THE PEOPLE on the plaza were now in wild turmoil, crying out and running for shelter, or staring in shocked disbelief at the bodies of the guards and the red stains appearing on the white unsullied paving. And now Belath whirled suddenly and began firing back the way he had come, and Bryant saw a small detachment of guards running in the next street over. They took shelter immediately, and began to fire.

"They came after me," said Belath. "I knocked one down and took his weapon right after they took you away. I knew I'd have only a few minutes --- what now?"

"Into the building," said Bryant.

They ran, ducking low. Missiles spattered against the marble wall, closer than Bryant liked. The plaza was filling with people, and many of them were armed men, apparently summoned in haste by the fleeing guards. Warriors or not, a city full of them were quite able to subdue four men and a boy.

An idea, which had been simmering in Bryant's mind, came to a full boil. "Up to the roof. I think there's a way to beat them ---"

There were few people in the

building, and what there were did not try to stop them. Phaon led them up broad marble stairs to the upper levels, and finally up a narrow stair of stone to the roof. Now there was nothing above them but the dome, and the slim tower of the Roving stood up against it with its crystal tube.

"Who's the best shot? Grach Chai? Feltrie? With a missile weapon. Feltrie? Okay. See how close you can come to that crystal ring without actually hitting it. Grach Chai, you and Belath hold the door there." He glanced over the parapet. The plaza was jammed, and the bodies of the fallen were being carried away. Somebody shouted, and missiles went snarling through the air, but the angle was bad and none of them even came close. "All right," said Bryant. "Now."

Feltrie drew a bead on the tower and pressed the firing stud. The missile whacked with a ringing sound against the tower, just under the crystal. It flattened and fell.

"Another," said Bryant. "Give 'em a couple, so they understand. But for God's sake don't hit it."

Feltrie gave them a couple. Phaon's face was white and he moved his lips nervously, looking up at the tower. From the plaza below came a shriek, and then a

groan of agony. Grach Chai fired very fast, three or four times, down the stairs. Then there was silence.

"Tell them," said Bryant to Phaon, "that if they want to continue their Roving, they must listen to us. Keep down, behind the parapet."

Phaon kept down. He shouted to the men below in the plaza. After a while there was an answer.

"They will listen. They ask what we want."

"Tell them we only wish to leave Kothmar. Tell them we will smash the crystal instantly if a shot is fired, or they try to rush us. But if they will hear us out, and help us, nothing will happen to it."

Phaon told them that. Again there was an answer. "The Speaker of the Council is down below," Phaon said, and Bryant's mind worked feverishly, looking ahead.

"Tell him to come up," he said. "Alone. Tell him he won't be harmed."

As they waited, Feltrie looked at Bryant puzzledly and said,

"Leave Kothmar? Where can we go?"

"Back up onto the surface here," said Bryant.

"To freeze to death? There's nothing up there but the two Var-konid ships!"

Grach Chai smiled. "My men will welcome us, I'm sure."

"I'm sure they would," said Bryant, "but we're not going to your ships. And you're still our prisoner. I'll take your weapon now."

Grach Chai looked at him levelly. Bryant added, "Feltrie is behind you. You can't get us both."

Grach Chai shrugged, grinned mirthlessly, and handed over the weapon.

Feltrie said, "Where *are* we going, on the surface?"

"You'll find out later and it's our only chance, and shut up for now," said Bryant.

The Speaker came then, reluctantly, angry and bewildered and more than a little frightened by the sudden upheaval in the orderly existence of Kothmar.

"Now then," said Bryant to Phaon, "tell him we're going up to the surface. Explain that we want armor, food, and water. Are there vehicles for surface use? If so, we want one."

The Speaker said that there were, although they had not been used for very many years, and would need servicing.

"Get them at it," Bryant said to Phaon. "Explain that when everything is ready we will leave this roof and go to the entrance shaft, and from there to the surface. Ex-

plain carefully that the Speaker goes with us as surety, and that he will be released as soon as we are safely out of Kothmar."

Phaon explained. And then there was a time of waiting, a time of tension, in which gloomy and foreboding thoughts went through Bryant's head.

His idea was simple and desperate. They were lost, if they stayed here. But on the surface, in the old spaceport, the emergency radio for world-wrecked star-ships might still be working. If it was, they could call the nearest civilized star.

If it wasn't, or if the Varkonides caught them, there was no hope at all.

They waited, and the three men from the outer world looked up at the tower whose power made sleeping men into cosmic lords.

"It's like a drug," Feltrie said. "Destructive, but so wonderful you don't care. You know what? We ought to smash it."

"No," said Bryant. "We can't shoot everybody in the city. They'd tear us to shreds. And besides - - -"

"Besides what?" said Feltrie.

"Never mind," said Bryant.

Grach Chai looked at him, and smiled.

The waiting time came to an end, and they and their ancient vehicle stood free in the bitter air

of the surface, under the dull red eye of the sun, and the shaft of Kothmar closed behind them.

They moved off, Phaon and his son and daughter, Bryant, Feltrie and Grach Chai, into the thousand miles of dust and nothing that lay between them and the spaceport above Annamar - - - and the Varkonides of Grach Chai.

## CHAPTER XI

THEY LAY HUDDLED in the night and the cold stars looked down upon them.

"We were crazy," Feltrie said.

"Yeah," said Bryant.

Grach Chai appeared to shrug inside his armor. "It's better than the House of Sleep."

"For you, yes," said Feltrie. "Even if you should die, you can die laughing at us. But for Bryant and me - - -"

"You're alive, aren't you?"

Feltrie grunted. "If you can call this living."

Grach Chai smiled. "Anyway, you're not absolutely dead. So you're still better off." He settled himself against the side of the truck. "Guard me well, and envy my unbroken slumber."

The truck shuddered in the gusts of wind. Bryant felt very tired, but he could not rest. Even in the protective armor, the bitter cold

gnawed at him. The night was a howling beast, a thing of dread and terror. He had never seen the night here before except from the warm and lighted shelter of the spaceport domes. The wind was incredible. It screamed and howled around the low body of the truck and tried to bury it in dust, and when that did not work it tried to blow it over. It sucked the heat away from the truck's interior, and it pounded on a man's courage with a great cold shattering fist, and above it there was only blackness and the uncaring stars.

This was the second night. There would be one more. He did not know whether they could stand it.

Someone moved, close to him. It was Cyra. "Shall we die after all?" she asked him.

He said, "I don't know."

She leaned her armored shoulder against his, in a gesture of comfort and affection. After a while he thought she slept.

"What about it?" said Feltrie. "Is there any chance at all?"

Bryant looked at Grach Chai. He seemed to be asleep. So did Phaon and Belath. He said,

"The radio was left in the old spaceport, I'm sure of that. Not only for use of possibly disabled ships, but because we thought we'd be coming back pretty soon. It should be able to raise another

civilized star and bring cruisers here fast, if we can reach it."

"If. And of course the Varkonides are camping on the port."

"Yeah. But one man might sneak past them at night, and get out the call for help."

Feltrie thought it over. "You figure to be that man?"

Bryant shrugged. "We'll settle that tomorrow night when we get near there. But I know the space-port better than you do, so - - -" He added after a moment, "When I do go, you hang onto Grach Chai tight. You might just be able to buy your lives with him, in a pinch."

They haggled briefly over who was to take first watch this night. Feltrie got it. He sat where he could watch Grach Chai. Bryant scrunched around, stiff and chilly in his armor. He did not think he could possibly sleep. But he did, and the last thing he thought of before he fell under the dark wave was how much he had come to hate this world, and the beautiful city of his youth. It had turned into a stifling trap, bringing him death instead of safety.

He dreamed about it. He was back in Annamar, only he was very big and the dome was very small, set over him like a turtle shell. There were sudden noises in it, and motion. He struggled to see what

they were, but there was a weight on him, and then a tremendous crash on the dome directly over his head that knocked him senseless.

When he could see again he was back in the dim interior of the truck, with everyone sleeping. Cyra had moved until she was lying across his chest, and that was the weight he had felt. Otherwise everything was all right, except that his head ached - - -

And except that Feltrie, who should have been sitting up awake, now lay quietly on the floor. And Grach Chai was gone.

**B**RYANT LIFTED Cyra from him. She murmured sleepily, but did not wake. He went to Feltrie, shining a light in his face. Feltrie groaned and blinked his eyes. It was quite a while before Bryant could get any sense out of him, and even then he could not say what had happened.

Grach Chai must have been shamming sleep all the while, waiting for a moment when Feltrie's attention was drawn elsewhere or was dulled by exhaustion. Then he had struck Feltrie down. Bryant remembered the noises in the dream, and the stunning crash. He must have tried to get up, but Cyra had weighed him down, and Grach Chai had hit him too, on

his helmet.

Feltrie began to feel around wildly under his armor. "They're gone," he said. "The micro-films. He must have taken them."

Bryant shook his head in black despair. "That's fine. And he can lead his men now straight to Kothmar, barely pausing to fix us on the way." He swore, to keep from crying. They had been through so much for those damned micro-films, and now they would not even live to say they had shot them, "And he must have heard us talk about the spaceport radio, too."

Feltrie said, "I'm sorry. But I wasn't asleep. I was - - - watching *that*, out there - - -" jerking his hand toward the outer night, " - - - and thinking about home. I guess he moved so fast I just didn't hear him."

"Well," said Bryant, "maybe we can still catch him. The truck can go faster than he can walk."

But he had not really allowed himself to hope, and so he was not particularly amazed or downhearted when they discovered that Grach Chai had succeeded in sabotaging the truck.

Bryant looked into the deadly blackness of the night that still had hours to go before dawn. "I'll just have to go after him," he said. "On foot."

"But you will die out there

alone," said Cyra, who was awake now. "Stay here, Hugh. He will not make it, either, no one could. Why must both of you die?"

"Because I don't trust Grach Chai to lie down and perish. And the only chance we have in the world to survive is to catch him before he can reach his own men."

He took rations and water, and ammunition for the weapon. He kissed Cyra's cold lips, and shook hands with Phaon and the boy. To Feltrie he said, "Get 'em working to repair the truck as soon as it's light. Make believe I'm going to catch him."

Feltrie said, "Luck." He added, "There's one thing that puzzles me."

"What's that?"

"Why didn't Grach Chai kill us when he had the chance?"

"I don't know," Bryant said, and walked away from the truck, in the black cold tearing wind.

And there was desolation under the dim stars.

He tried not to think.

The armor was heavy and cumbersome. It chaxed and impeded him, but as against the lunar chill it was frail as tissue paper, even with the heat control turned up full. Blown dust whispered over the faceplate of his helmet. The truck was lost behind him. Grach Chai was lost somewhere ahead. Apart

from them nothing lived on the whole vast surface of this dead and silent world.

He walked.

Dawn came, a slow trickle of red light oozing through the night like blood through a dark bandage. It spread with glacial slowness across the plain, giving a gradual illusion of warmth. The wind dropped. It was day.

And day went on forever.

He walked. He ate and drank, and rested, and walked on, following his compass toward Annamar.

Just before noon he thought he saw a dark moving speck on the restless red, far in front of him and to his right. He followed it all through the long afternoon, and he thought he was gaining on it. By the time the crimson sun touched the horizon he had almost begun to hope. Then by the last of the light he saw a ridge of low rocky hills, and knew that they were a spur of the mountain chain north of the spaceport. The distant figure moved in among them and disappeared.

Bryant sat down in the dust, in the middle of the plain. The wind rose and the darkness came.

After a while Bryant ate and drank some water, and got to his feet again. He began to walk toward the hills.

All that night he dragged him-

self among the chalky boulders and the rotten stone, up and down. He fell often, and several times he passed out for short periods, but he did not stop. By now he was beyond stopping. He was beyond the conscious thought and reason that would lead to a decision to stop. The rocks broke some of the force of the wind, and the footing was firmer than the desert. When the dull dawn came again into the sky he had reached the edge of the scarp. Far, far in the distance across the plain he could see the pylon of the spaceport.

**DIRECTLY BELOW HIM,**  
Grach Chai sat at the foot of the scarp, eating and drinking in a sheltered place before he set out on the last part of his journey.

Bryant lifted his weapon. Grach Chai looked up and saw him and raised his hands. His voice came thin on the cold air.

"I'm not armed. Come down."

Bryant hesitated, fingering the trigger-stud. He thought of Feltrie and himself, still alive when Grach Chai could easily have killed them.

He said, "You took a weapon from the truck. Where is it?"

"It was heavy. I threw it away. Come down, Bryant, and eat."

Bryant lowered his weapon. He

moved down the face of the scarp, lurching and sliding in the dust.

Grach Chai watched him. "I didn't think you could catch me," he said, and smiled. "You should have been a Varkonid."

He had not risen. Bryant stood in front of him, the weapon held loosely at the ready.

"Give me back the films, Grach Chai."

"I threw them away, too. In the dust, the desert, I don't think anyone will ever find them. Be satisfied, Bryant. Feltree still has what information is in his head, and his head is still on his shoulders. It evens things up. Fair enough?"

Bryant asked, "Why didn't you kill us?"

"We have fought together," Grach Chai said. "A comrade in arms is no fit subject for murder." He held out his water bottle. "Here."

Bryant sat down. He drank from Grach Chai's bottle and gave it back. He shared with Grach Chai some of the rations he had brought.

"You will not change your mind and come with me?" asked Grach Chai.

"No."

Grach Chai got up. "I'm sorry, Bryant. Well, I'm going."

Bryant lifted his weapon again until it tentered on Grach Chai's chest. "No," he said. "Oh, no,

you're not going to get your men and ships and bring them here, and on to Kothmar. I'll have to kill you."

Grach Chai stared at him, with an incredulous expression, and then he said,

"You think I want Kothmar now?"

Bryant nodded. "A fine base for Varkon. You said so yourself. Yes, you want it."

Grach Chai exclaimed with sudden violence, "Why, gods of space, man, for the loot of twenty Kothmars, for a hundred bases, I wouldn't let my men try the Roving! Or even hear about it!"

Bryant held his weapon steady, and said nothing.

"Listen," said Grach Chai. "You know the Varkonides. We're a star-roving folk and always will be, mad to learn what's beyond the next nebula. If I took the Roving to Varkon, none of us would ever fly a ship again! No --- that thing could ruin Varkon. If we go to Andromeda, it'll be in our own bodies, our own ships!" He added, "and if you're wise, Bryant, you'll forget the Roving too."

Bryant looked at him with the steady stare of exhaustion. He said, "You mean that you'll just take your ships off and go home?"

"As fast as I can get my men

aboard and out of here," said Grach Chai.

"Grach Chai."

"Yes?"

"You're hard and cruel but I don't think you're a liar."

"I'm not, Bryant."

Bryant lowered the weapon. "All right, go ahead. But remember this! We'll be coming into the Cloud someday!"

Grach Chai smiled. "Come ahead. You'll find Varkon waiting for you."

He turned and walked away out onto the red plain. Bryant looked at his receding figure, and looked down at his weapon, and smiled.

He waited. A little after noon there was a clap of distant thunder and then another, and two streaks of flame went up into the sky.

Bryant rose and began to walk

toward the distant pylon. If the radio worked, he thought that help would get here in two days.

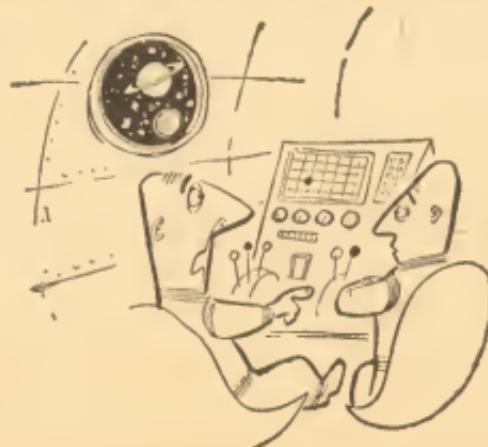
It was three, actually, before the ship from the nearest base far along the Rim lifted off the rusty planet into the glare of the red sun. Bryant, with Cyra at the port, looked at the world of his boyhood.

He thought of the men of Kothmar, under the buried dome, and of the Roving.

*Dying dreamers - - - but also cosmic kings indeed, free of the wider universe that he would never see, lords of a million, million suns . . . .*

His arm tightened around Cyra. He did not think that he would ever forget the Roving.

He thought perhaps when he was old, and everything had changed, he might come back . . . .



"Why no, I supposed **YOU** were the navigator!"

# MICROSCOPIC NIGHTMARE

by

*C. H. Thames*

**Fred Baker didn't mind wallowing in a few pleasant drinks—but plunging into a microscopic sea of monsters was a dangerous way to sober up!**

EVEN WHEN mildly intoxicated, Fred Baker recognized Professor Brinkley as the microbiologist tried to lose himself in the crowded fraternity lounge. Fred smiled, making his way for the professor: Brinkley wore a string tie and a black serge suit and a clipped, pointed beard and looked about as comfortable in the weekly fraternity gathering as a grasshopper in a cup of jello.

"Baker?" Professor Brinkley said as he spied Fred through the crowd. "I've got to see you, Baker."

A cute young thing from one of the local sororities undulated over to Fred and complained that he hadn't danced with her all evening, but he mumbled some excuses, got hold of the professor's scrawny arm, and pulled him off into a corner. Suddenly Fred's face be-

came very serious. He said, his voice all but lost in the hum of the party, "Is it about Alice?" Alice was Professor Brinkley's niece and was supposed to have been Fred's date for the fraternity party, something she had been for every other party of the semester. But when Fred had called at the Brinkley house earlier, Alice had not been there. Brinkley had been vague about it: something to the effect that Alice had been called out of town suddenly. Brinkley had seemed nervous then; now he appeared to be badly frightened.

"Yes, Alice," he said. "It's about Alice, Fred. My God, boy, what have I done?"

"I don't know. What *have* you done?"

"Fred Baker, are you drunk?" the Professor asked, staring at him intently.

"No. I've had a few. I guess it



was because I'd planned on giving Alice my fraternity pin tonight. I guess - - "

"Alice!" croaked the professor. Then, clutching the lapel of Fred's jacket: "Fred, you've got to rescue her!"

"Rescue? Did you say rescue?" He wished now that he had not had those few drinks. His head buzzed. The party was a flashing kaleidoscope of color and sound.

"Come with me, Fred. Right now. I'll show you."

Just then Sig Sigitzi, the Pennsylvania coal-mining right guard of the University football team, came over. "What's this about rescuing little old Alice?" he

boomed. He asked it so loudly that half a dozen faces turned to stare at them in the dim light of the hazy, smoke-filled room.

"It's nothing, Siggy - - " Fred began.

But Sig boomed: "You said something about rescuing Alice. I heard you." He loomed accusingly. He was one of Fred's closest friends and during the football season he opened the holes through which fullback Fred Baker plunged for those vital four and five yard gains. But right now he was under the influence of sour mash bourbon and his booming voice was rapidly attracting attention.

"Let's get out of here, doc,"

Fred told Professor Brinkley.

"Going with you," Sig said.

Professor Brinkley nodded at once. "Let him come. Quickly, both of you." He mumbled: "For once Mr. Sigitzi may put that brawn of his to some use." The Professor was definitely not a football fan.

Outside in the cool darkness, Sig raised his arm dramatically like a non-com about to lead a charge. "To the biology lab!" he boomed, and lumbered off into the darkness.

Professor Brinkley and Fred Baker ran after him.

COFFEE bubbled merrily in a silex as the Professor got out his equipment. There was a microscope, a single slide with a drop of moisture under the thin glass cover, a bright light directly over the scope. "It's a simple slide," Professor Brinkley said in a scared voice. "The kind you studied in biology one, boys. A drop of fresh water, allowed to stand . . . ."

"I remember," Sig said proudly as Fred got the coffee, black and steaming, and dished it out, "There were those little flat wriggle things . . . ."

"Paramecia, single-celled animals with a kind of elongated, bulgy oval shape."

"- - and those other little critters without any shape at all, the ones that sent out arms - - pseudopods! - - in all directions - - "

"Amoeba," said Professor Brinkley.

"And yeah, rotifers! But I don't remember what rotifers were."

"The simplest multi-celled animals, hardly bigger than paramecia."

"Yeah. And - - well, that's about all I remember."

"You've done fine," Professor Brinkley said with academic enthusiasm. "This particular culture also has some single-celled algae of the chlorella family, for eating purposes."

"Eating purposes?" asked Fred finishing his cup of black coffee and speaking for the first time. "I thought those one-celled animals and the rotifers ate each other."

"They do, Fred. They do."

Fred's head felt much better now. He lit a cigarette and it tasted very good after the black coffee. The combination served to sober him, although Sig, who was drinking his coffee more slowly, still looked slightly high.

"Alice, as you know," Professor Brinkley said suddenly and apparently irrelevantly, "is an excellent swimmer."

"About the chlorella," Fred be-

gan, but Professor Brinkley waved him off irritably.

"I have something else to show you, boys," he said, leading them to a corner of the laboratory. "Do you know what this is?"

"Well," said Sig laughing, "It ain't a piece of microbiological equipment."

"It's an arbalete spear gun," Fred said, studying the three feet of metal and thick rubber band and the deadly-looking harpoon.

"Ever use one, boy?"

"Down in Florida once a couple of years ago. Did a little skin-diving and spear-fishing with it."

"You remember how it operates?"

"Sure, but - - -"

"You'll probably need it, Fred. Come with me."

Professor Brinkley took the spear gun and returned to the laboratory table with it, placing the deadly underwater weapon down alongside the microscope. "As you point out," he said with abrupt pedantic enthusiasm, "the one-celled animals generally eat one another, thus making plant-life in the preparation of such a slide unnecessary."

"Sure, sure, doc," Fred said. "But what's all this got to do with Alice? You brought us here saying it was about Alice. Is she in some kind of trouble?"

"Yes, Fred. She is."

"And we can help?"

"If you want to."

"I want to."

"Not without me running interference for you," Sig said. "Hell, what good's a fullback without a running guard?"

Professor Brinkley bent over the microscope, focussing it quickly and expertly with the water-culture slide in the field of vision. Fred tested the spring of the spear-gun while he waited. A spear-gun and a microscope. It was one hell of a combination.

"There," said Professor Brinkley. "There we are, Fred. Have a look. Of course, you may need to turn the fine adjuster a trifle."

Fred bent over the microscope with an unfathomable eagerness. At first there was only a greyish haze, but he twirled the fine adjustment nob for a moment and all at once the field swam into focus under the bright light. A strand of chlorella algae, like a green chain, spanned one segment of the rectangular world under the cover of the laboratory slide. The entire universe under that thin glass cover was less than an inch long and hardly more than half an inch wide and yet somehow it conveyed to Fred the idea of vastness.

A small group of paramaecia, their flattened oval bodies glisten-

ing, the cytoplasm and other cellular material pulsing and throbbing within their membranes, their hundreds of whip-like cillae stroking the water and creating currents which swept minute marine particles toward them and finally into their digestive maws, swam into view. Behind them came a school of larger, shapeless amoebae. Each amoeba was perhaps three times the size of each paramecium, and the paramecia seemed to know it, because they wasted no time in fleeing. The amoebae came after them, and one big fellow, advancing through the water by making his shapeless body flow forward through its own membrane and dragging the membrane after it, reached the rearguard of the fleeing creatures, suddenly shot out two long pseudopods, and engulfed a paramecium. Dinnertime, thought Fred, fascinated by the grim battle for survival in the microscopic waterworld, as he had been as a freshman in biology.

Suddenly something else flashed into view. It was a rotifer, cone-shaped and multi-cellular but no bigger than the largest of the paramecia or amoebae, chasing a small rapidly-swimming creature. The small creature, which was still off on one end of the field of vision and half-hidden by some strands of branching chlorella, was one

which Fred could not immediately place. Why, he thought, startled, it almost seemed to have tiny arms and legs . . . .

It swam away from the chlorella and came abruptly into focus. Fred's face drained white. He stood up and then went back to the microscope and looked again. It was still there.

What he saw was a starkly naked girl swimming for her life. The girl was Alice Brinkley.

FRED LIT a cigarette. "You saw?" Professor Brinkley asked him.

"God, yes!"

"You see now I'm sure that I couldn't tell you. I had to let you see for yourself."

"But Alice - - how - - ?"

"For a long time I have been working on certain endocrine secretions which control size and weight, Fred. As you may know, I was once mentioned for a Nobel Prize for work in this field, although I did not win it."

"Yes, yes. Go on!" Fred urged before the professor went off on a long tangent.

"I developed my synthetic endocrine secretion to an astonishing degree. For example, I could decrease the size of hamsters and other laboratory animals at will, reducing them to microscopic di-

mensions and then returning them to normal size with a sub-microscopic injection of the reversing secretion."

"And you did it to Alice?" Fred asked in a shocked voice.

"Alice!" croaked Sig, rushing to the microscope and focusing it with his big, powerful hands.

"I didn't do it," Professor Brinkley said. "Alice did it herself. She suggested it to me once and I absolutely refused. It seemed safe but I wasn't going to try it on a human being, least of all my own niece. But Alice is a stubborn girl. And, although she's quite beautiful, there's only one thing Alice ever boasts about."

"Yes," Fred said. "Her swimming ability. Go on."

"She was determined to - - to do what you have seen. I couldn't keep her away from the endocrine secretion. I didn't know what she was planning. I - - I found this note." Professor Brinkley rumaged in the pocket of his tweed jacket and found a crumpled ball of paper. Fred opened it on the lab table and read:

*"Dear Uncle Brinkey: There's a water-culture slide in the microscope. There's a daring young girl in the slide - - or who will be in the slide by the time you read this note. Her name is Alice Brinkley and she apologizes in advance for*

*being a pain in the neck, but she thinks it ought to be a great deal of fun trying to out-swim the hungry amoebae and rotifers. She may be wrong. It might be dangerous. So, Uncle Brinkey, she wishes you'd rush right over to the microscope and get her in focus. At the first sign of danger, please return her to normal size. Thank you. Love, Alice."*

"Oh, no!" groaned Fred.

"I see her! I see her!" Sig boomed. "Will you look at that! Will you . . . ." Abruptly he blushed. He turned away from the microscope. "She's mother-naked!" he cried.

Fred asked the Professor: "Why don't you just turn her back to normal size? How long has she been there? What - - "

"Since this afternoon. I can't return her to normal size."

"Ever?"

"I didn't say that. I can't do it now because of the slide cover. Ordinarily, I don't put covers on those cultures. It's only a loose covering, of course. That is, there's a layer of air to breathe below it, above the surface of the water. But if Alice were suddenly to grow to normal proportions, the glass cover would crush her as she grew."

"Then what can we do?"

"Go in there after her. Swim with her to the edge of the cover

and out from under it. Then you'll be returned to normal size. That's what you *can* do," Professor Brinkley said bleakly, "although I can't hope or expect that you will. After all - - "

"Can't, hell," said Fred, stripping off his jacket and shirt, and reaching down for his shoelaces. "Can't, my foot! How soon can you inject me with that stuff? How soon - - "

**T**HREE WAS a ripping sound as Sig, still slightly pie-eyed, climbed out of his jacket and shirt. "Not without me," he said. "Not without your interference, pal. Who ever heard of an all-state fullback getting anywhere unless he ran behind an all-state guard?"

Professor Brinkley seemed torn by indecision. "I can't really expect you to go through with this, boys," he said glumly. "You'd be taking your life in your hands. You'd be exposing yourselves in a universe in which amoebae, hungry and twice your size, hunt voraciously for food, and giant rotifers, implacable masters of their watery domain, flash like enormous baracudas through the water, in which - - "

"In which we're going to rescue Alice!" said Fred, down to his undershorts now. "Do you inject the stuff, doc? Yes? Then

bring on your hypodermic."

While the professor went for his equipment and set up the needle and the phial, Fred peered into the microscope again. At first he could not find Alice. But he immediately spotted the big rotifer which had been pursuing her. It seemed to be the largest creature in the slide. It was now nuzzling against a thick strand of the chlorella, swimming back and forth, butting it, seeking . . .

And then Fred saw Alice. She was crouched between two filaments of the chain-like plants. The filaments were thick around as her waist and she seemed pretty well hidden. Still, the hungry rotifer seemed confident and immensely powerful.

" . . . reduced to one two-hundred thousandth of your original size," Professor Brinkley was saying as he returned to them with his equipment, hot and gleaming from an instrument sterilizer. "You'll be completely at the mercy of a world which will appear to be several miles square to you, until you can swim out from under the cover with Alice, when I'll be able to return you to normal size."

"All right, all right," Fred said. "I want to go through with it. Now. Right now. But look, doc: just make it me. I can't ask Siggy

to come along."

"You're damn right you can't ask," Sig growled. "Because *I'm* telling *you*."

Fred shook his hand solemnly, gratefully, and then felt the sting of Professor Brinkley's needle. He felt nothing at first, and took hold of the spear-gun. "Will this become smaller with me, doc?" he asked.

"Yes, Fred. Apparently inanimate objects . . ." the professor went off into a long explanation. But all at once Fred began to feel giddy. His vision swam and there was a roaring in his ears, as of far distant surf pounding. Something lifted him and he was swung over an enormous chasm. He looked up and fleetingly had a glimpse of Professor Brinkley, grown gigantic, lifting him gingerly between thumb and forefinger, holding him over the microscope slide while he shrank and shrank. Then he was dropped through vast distances, turning end over end, falling, managing to maintain his grasp on the spear gun . . . .

He alighted with a hard thump. He was on a flat, transparent plain. Some distance away he saw Siggy sitting, a perplexed look on his face. And off in the distance was what seemed to be a pool of water -- above the level of the plain! He did not know what con-

tained it: surface tension, he decided. And floating lightly above the water seemed to be a vast sheet, a foot thick, of a hard, transparent substance. Between the water's surface and the gleaming, thick sheet were spaces and bubbles of air.

"Hey, Fred!" Siggy called. "You think -- "

He did not finish. Something big and black came and prodded both of them toward the apparently un-contained lake. They slipped and skidded along the slick surface and Fred realized that the professor was prodding them toward the water with some instrument barely visible to the unaided eye, but which now looked gigantic to them.

The water swam up at them, then hit them like a solid wall. Fred felt stinging, choking pain -- and was engulfed . . . .

HE WAS reclining on a green, spongy substance. He was completely submerged in water but a bubble of air like a diving helmet surrounded his head. The resilient green substance was a linked filament of chlorella.

Fred heard a munching sound and whirled. Siggy was standing on the chlorella, balanced precariously. His head and shoulders were out of water. He was munch-

ing on a chunk of chlorella. "Hey, this stuff is pretty good," he said.

Fred grinned. "You would eat at a time like this." Then he scowled. "If only there was some way we knew in which direction Alice . . . . say, wait a minute! There was only one strand of chlorella, or one area of it anyhow, under the slide-cover. And Alice was in it."

"So are we!" Siggy hollered.

"That's what I meant," Fred said, and stood up. The bubble of air burst suddenly and he choked on water, then got his head out of it and took a deep breath.

At that moment something came toward them through the water. "Look at that," Siggy gasped.

It was an amoeba. Only a small one, Fred judged, remembering how big they had seemed, compared with Alice. This one was almost as big - - apparently - - as a man.

"Look out!" Siggy hollered.

Fred had let the creature come too close. He stepped aside, wading slowly, awkwardly through the water. Grey churning pseudopods rolled out toward him, coiled hot and stingingly on his bare legs. He yelled and fired the spear-gun point blank, the thick rubber spring thrumming and vibrating, the harpoon blurred into and entirely through the amoeba's body without doing any noticeable damage. Fred

began to drag back the harpoon line while Siggy attacked the monster with his bare hands.

"It's slippery, like it's oiled or something," he said. "I can't get it loose."

The stinging in Fred's legs was now a growing, spreading numbness as the amoeba's pre-digestive juices went to work. Siggy said: "It's like a leech. I can't budge it, Fred."

Deep within the shining, flowing cytoplasm of the creature was a darker, differentiated glob. The nucleus, Fred thought. You couldn't particularly hurt a one-celled monster by spearing it, but you might damage or kill it if the harpoon could strike the controlling nucleus . . . .

Fred wound the spear-gun again, feeling the thick rubber go taut. The numbness was climbing to his waist now and Siggy yowled as fresh pseudopods appeared and clutched at his arms, entrapping him.

With a silent prayer, Fred released the harpoon. It struck the amoeba this time and did not go all the way through. It became embedded in the darker glob of the nucleus. The amoeba shuddered throughout its whole length. The gleaming cytoplasm became cloudy, troubled.

"It's letting go!" Siggy boomed.

And, moments later, the dead carcass of the creature floated away. A roving swarm of bulging oval paramecia swam into view, and feasted . . . .

"First encounter," Fred said, "and it was damn near our last. How do you feel?"

"Kind of numb."

"Up to a swim?"

"We got to find Alice, don't we?"

"All right, Siggy. You go that way, I'll go the other. If you find her, holler. I'll do the same. And you take the spear-gun."

"Me?"

"Sure. I can swim better than you can. Faster. I can always get away from trouble - - "

"You hope."

"But you couldn't hope to, not if speed counted. You take the spear-gun."

"But you - - "

"We'll be keeping to the chlorella. We won't be easily seen. Here's the gun. Let's go."

Seconds later, they were swimming off in opposite directions. Fred had not gone very far before a paramecium swam quite close. It was a small fellow, no bigger than a hound dog but of course merely oval and undifferentiated. It nuzzled the chlorella quite close to Fred and then swam away. Fred wondered if Professor Brinkley was

watching them now, and decided in the affirmative. He could picture the professor's eyes glued to the eyepiece of the microscope, could picture the worried frown . . . .

"Fred! Hey, Fred!"

It was Siggy's booming voice, coming from a long way off. It was followed by a scream - - Alice's voice.

FRED FORGOT the cover of the chlorella filament, and swam in a quick, water-frothing crawl. He soon passed the dead amoeba, now almost entirely eaten by the voracious paramecia, and kept going. Here the algae grew more thickly, making his passage through the chains and branching filaments difficult, but pounding and churning the water with arms and legs, he fought his way through.

Then suddenly the water cleared up ahead. First he saw only the rotifer, big as a fifteen-foot long whale-shark. The rotifer, translucent like the smaller amoebae and paramecia, was nevertheless a multicelled animal with a head and a mouth and a powerful, lashing body for swimming or stinging. The rotifer was between Fred and its prey.

He heard another scream and without thinking any further swam straight through the water for the

monster's back. He struck it, butting as hard as he could. The rotifer turned, beating the water to foam. Fred took a breath and went under. The harpoon protruded from the rotifer's side, just behind the head. Fred had a brief glimpse of Siggy and Alice treading water on the other side of the monster. Siggy was struggling with the spear-gun, trying to withdraw the harpoon.

Fred planted his feet on the monster's flank. It thrashed and twisted in the water, trying to dislodge him. He got both hands on the haft of the harpoon and tugged. The weapon remained there, half the haft buried.

Then the rotifer surged forward, making for Alice. Nimblly, gracefully, she swam clear, her smooth limbs flashing. Fred's vision began to blur. He needed air desperately. If he didn't get air soon he would swallow water instinctively and the rotifer would have him. But the harpoon was their only hope. He had to get the harpoon loose. Without the harpoon they wouldn't have a chance.

He tugged with all his might, his football-trained muscles straining. His lungs burned for air. He couldn't see at all now. Distantly, he heard a scream . . . .

He seemed to explode clear of the rotifer, the harpoon coming

with him. The cord trailed after him as his head broke surface and he gasped in air gratefully.

The water frothed and bubbled and Alice surfaced, head and shoulders and lovely breasts rising from the water. "Fred," she said. "Fred!" The water frothed again. Before he could go to her, she went under.

Fred surface-dived desperate, and saw them. The rotifer had Siggy by an arm and Alice by a leg. They were both struggling and thrashing in the grip of the toothless mouth, but could not get loose. The rotifer's mouth wouldn't hurt them. The rotifer would merely hold them underwater until they drowned.

The spear-gun! thought Fred.

But Siggy was holding it. If Fred got close enough, the rotifer might get him too. And at least he had the harpoon.

Carrying it like a lance, he swam for the monster. Then the lack of air, the wild, surging action, the spinning, darting monster, the weight of the harpoon, all fused together in a desperate, patternless chaos of violence. He stabbed with the harpoon, twisting it, then pulling it free. He stabbed again. He could not tell if he was hurting the rotifer. It did not bleed. It was bloodless. It made no sound. It had no sound-

making mechanism. Once its rear whipped through the water at Fred, striking and stunning him. But grimly he clung to the harpoon, returned with it, buried the point in the thick membrane of the monster, withdrew it, buried it again.

His chest felt as if it would burst for lack of air. His oxygen starved muscles grew weary. But again and again he plunged the harpoon home, hardly knowing where the strength came from, only knowing that Alice was in deadly danger, and Siggy, who had volunteered to help him . . . .

At last, when his limbs would no longer obey the orders his brain sent, he surfaced wearily. He half expected the rotifer to follow quickly with that darting mouth, to open it, to grab and pull him under . . . .

The rotifer surfaced. On its side, flopping over in the water. The rotifer was dead. Alice and Siggy swam to him and the three of them followed the filaments of algae toward the edge of the great lake which was a drop of water under a slide-cover on Professor Brinkley's microscope . . . .

**“FRED BAKER!”** Professor Brinkley said. “You wait until she gets some clothing on before you hug her like that!”

But Alice, drenched and glisten-

ing, sighed contentedly.

“That’s all right, doc,” Fred said, “I was going to give her my frat pin tonight, anyhow.”

“I’ll take it!” Alice cried.

“You see?” Siggy said. He was beaming and blushing happily.

When she realized where they were and what they were doing, Alice blushed too and retired to the next room. She returned soon, fully dressed and waited until Siggy and Fred appeared in their clothing.

“Fred,” she said. And they hugged each other again. It looked as if they wouldn’t be stopped, no matter what.

“Schmaltzy,” Professor Brinkley said.

Siggy told him: “Sure is, doc.”

“You people forgot the spear-gun.”

“The which?”

“The spear-gun.”

Siggy nodded. “I guess we did.”

“Let’s leave it there,” said Professor Brinkley. “Let’s leave it for the biology class tomorrow. I wonder what they will make of an arbalete spear gun reduced to a quarter-millionth of its size -- in a slide-culture of rotifers and amoebae?”

And that was exactly what the professor did, although there is no record of the biology class’ reaction.



# The Valiant Die Hard!

by

*Adam Chase*

Jim Keene was the best racer the Spacers owned. And that was an odd thing—a man in the role of an animal — enslaved on his own planet!

THEY LET me leave the pad-dock at eight o'clock the night before the big race. I couldn't help thinking what a nice

guy my trainer was: it isn't every steed who gets out for a couple of beers before the big one.

The tavern was crowded. There



were plenty of folks who knew me there. Jim Keene, they said. We've got a lot of money riding on those legs of yours tomorrow, Jim. Good old Jim Keene, going to make all of us rich. There was the usual autograph signing, although it's not as common as it was in my father's time. Fewer people can read and write these days, but that's as it should be, isn't it? What is it the Spacers call us? - - domesticated animals, clever domesticated animals. Well, they ought to know.

I was nursing my second beer and bewailing the fact that it was all I could have, when the girl came over to my table. She was so pretty, she startled me. I waved away the group of well-wishers and moved a chair for her to sit down. I can behave like a gentleman, I guess. The Spacers taught me.

She smiled shyly and I smiled and in a minute I recognized her. She was a filly out of Spacer Saffron's stables, a good sprinter but not much on endurance. I didn't think she would enter the People-chase tomorrow: those fast flashy fillies are all right over the short distances and if you keep the obstacles to a minimum, but what chance have they got on the big one from where the Battery used to be all the way up to Central Park South, through the silent, ghostly

caverns of the city our ancestors built and lived in before the Spacers came?

"I have to speak to you, Mr. Keene," she said. "I'm Evanne."

"Sure." I waved a hand. "Go ahead."

"About the race tomorrow . . ."

"You aren't running, are you?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. I don't expect to win, of course. But I think I can finish the course and I'm going to try. I need the money."

"Well," I said, "I wish you luck." I meant that; for a girl she had plenty of pluck.

"Listen," she said. "You're the favorite."

I gave her my modest smile. She was a long-legged, long blonde-haired dream in tight gold slacks and halter with a sparkling gold tiara on her lovely head. That costume must have stood her master a cool five hundred bucks. I figured she was going to ask me about the course tomorrow, ask for some advice on how to get through the grind of the race in one piece. I waited with my smile and then she jarred me.

"Can you," she whispered, leaning forward and looking at me earnestly across the small table, "throw the race?"

I said, "What did you say?"

"Perhaps you'd like to come outside and talk."

"We'll talk right here," I said a little angrily. Who did she think she was?

SHE LEANED forward again, then back. For an instant the halter fell away, then clung. She was darkly tanned, the way the Spacers like their fillies, but I had caught a breathless glimpse of curving white roundness. I wondered if she had done that on purpose.

"If you want it that way," she said. "You see, you've got to lose that race tomorrow, Mr. Keene."

"So I've got to, huh? Who's supposed to win, you?"

"That's silly and you know it. I couldn't possibly win, but I can't tell you who will. It doesn't matter does it?"

"I ought to report you to the Spacers," I said.

She looked at me. There was no terror in her eyes. Apparently whatever had brought her to me was more important than her own safety. "Jeremiah Keene," she said.

I leaned forward across the table and grabbed her wrist. "Say it again," I told her.

She didn't flinch. "Jeremiah Keene. He sent me."

My voice was tight. "My father's dead."

"No. He sent me. Yesterday I saw him."

"You're lying."

"You're hurting my hand."

"He's dead," I said breathlessly.

"The Spacers said so. An accident."

"Did you ever see the body?"

"No-o."

"The Spacers didn't want to admit their champion long distance runner had become a rebel."

"I don't believe you."

"Your father sent me, Jim. You must not win that race tomorrow."

"Why?" I flung the word like a challenge in her face.

"Because we're betting on a long-shot. If the long-shot wins we win a lot of money. We need that money if we're going to be free one day."

"Free!"

"Well, we were free once, weren't we?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "My grandfather remembered, although he was hardly a boy then. Free. You can call it free if you want. Free to fight wars among ourselves. Free to cheat and kill."

"Whatever we did, we did because we wanted to. We're human beings, Jim Keene. It's the way humans were meant to live. What do you think we are now?" she asked me bitterly. "Why, we're hardly more than beasts of burden. Fewer and fewer of us can read and write. In another two generations we'll all be going

naked."

"We have a good life under the Spacers . . . ."

"A soft life. Domestic animals. I hate it!"

"Then don't take out your aggressions on me." I said, getting up. "The answer is no."

"Your father . . . ."

"If you lie about that once more I'm going to turn you in to the Spacers."

I didn't give her a chance to lie about it, though. I got up and waved at a few well-wishers and went outside. It was Midsummer Eve, the eve of the big New York Peoplechase. A hot, clear night, the sky blazing with stars. That was something, I told myself, wasn't it? You could see the stars. In the old days, according to the Spacers, our cities were so crowded, and dust-filled, and exhaust-fume-choked, and ablaze with light that you could barely see the stars. There were over two billion people on Earth -- that's two *billion* -- before the Spacers came down and we foolishly fought them and got most of our cities ruined and most of our people killed off so now there weren't more than three or four hundred millions of us left.

SOMETHING moved in the shadows and the next thing I knew I had a fight on my hands.

I couldn't see him in the darkness, but he was slender and whiplash strong. I grunted under his assault and took him in a quick headlock and sent him reeling off against a buildingfront. He was a Wild One, I decided. There are plenty of them living in the wilds of Long Island, away from civilization and the Spacer rule. Sometimes they sneak across the river into the city very boldly.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the outside dimness, I waited for him to come at me again. I shouldn't have: I know that. I'm a racer and I've got a responsibility to my owner, who trains me, feeds me, clothes me and educates me. I've got no business messing with trouble. If I sustained an injury, where would my master be then?

The Wild One came at me again. I was completely intent on him, on his ragged breath, on the way he sobbed trying to get a lungfull of air, on the way his arms swung loosely as he came. I was so intent on him that I didn't see the other one.

The first thing I knew, this arm had snaked around my neck from behind. It was a muscular arm and it constricted my windpipe. I tried to fight him off. I jabbed back blindly with my elbows and lashed back with my feet. And then the

first Wild One hit me in the face once and in the stomach twice and when the one behind me let go I fell down.

"His legs!" a voice whispered. "Tramp on his legs!"

I rolled over and heard their heavy shoes come down on cracked, broken pavement. I crawled and then got to my feet and one of them clung to me from behind. I planted the heel of my foot in his face and had the satisfaction of hearing him scream. Then I ran for it.

There was no sense in them trying to chase a racer. They didn't even try.

When I got back to the paddock, Spacer Bronze was waiting for me. He was tall for a Spacer, almost three feet tall. He had the wide-space antenna and the receding mandibles of the good-natured, truly intelligent Spacer. We had always got along fine.

"You're all in a lather," he said.  
"It's nothing."

But he spread his gossamer wings and alighted on my back and stroked my head. "You're drenched."

"I said it was nothing, sir."

"There, boy. There. You're alarmed. I can sense it."

"It's all right," I said. For some reason I was reluctant to talk about the girl. I didn't know her name,

but I could identify her all right. She belonged to Spacer Saffron's stables.

A light flashed on and Spacer Bronze clicked excitedly. "You're hurt!" he said. "You're bleeding."

"Just a little brawl."

"Brawl? Brawl! How are your legs? If they've hurt your legs . . . ."

I stripped out of my trousers quickly and he looked at my legs. They were unmarked, but I could have told him that. "I insist that you tell me everything that happened, Jimmy," he said. He hovered anxiously in air, his wings beating and droning. He had a genuine fondness for me: he had owned my father until his death and he had raised me from infancy. Naturally now his first concern was for my legs. I'm a racer, aren't I?

Pretty soon he called in a couple of the stable girls to give me an alcohol rub. I couldn't help smiling. He behaved just like a motherhen. Finally he said, "Now tell me who did it."

"A couple of Wild Ones," I said. "Hell, they probably saw the way I was dressed and figured I had a lot of money."

"You wouldn't lie to me, Jimmy."

"No. Why should I?" Why should I? - - that was a good question. I didn't know why I should lie to him, but I was doing

it. Obviously the beautiful blonde filly had given the two Wild Ones some kind of signal. She had probably waited until I had refused to throw the race, then let them know in some way.

"How did my father die?" I asked Spacer Bronze abruptly.

"Why, Jimmy. That's a funny question, boy. You know how he died. It was in a transportation accident en route to the Equinox racing course at Montauk Point."

"What happened to his body?"

"The truck exploded and burned. Everything was burned, Jimmy. Everything. Funny you never asked before. It's been seven years."

"Yes, it is funny," I said. "Isn't it?"

"Jimmy, I'm going to give you a mild sedative now, then it's off to bed with you."

"Spacer Bronze," I said "is there a possibility that my father's still alive?"

"Jimmy! I already told you. We don't doubt our masters, boy, do we?"

I looked at him, his gossamer wings droning in front of my face, his antenna quivering. "No, sir," I said at last. "No, sir, we don't."

"Then you just go to bed, Jimmy. We'll forget all about it. In the morning you go out there and win the big Peoplechase and afterwards you can take a week off

fishing at Sandy Hook or seeing the sights of Hudson Valley or studying over at Spacer Saffron's or Spacer Chalk's. All right?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Then can we forget about the sedative?"

"I guess so, sir."

He was glad for that. I could sense it in the way his mandibles clicked. The sedative was all right if I needed it: it was better than a sleepless night -- something to which many high-strung racers were prone. But it might leave you woozy in the morning.

One of the stable girls hung around singing lullabies. She had a nice soprano voice and it should have been soothing but I remained awake for a long time thinking.

I hardly could wait for the morning -- not to run the big Peoplechase so much as to see Spacer Saffron's filly again.

IT WAS a clear, almost a brilliant day. Birds were singing in the ruins of the downtown skyscrapers when I awoke. The stable girls were already up and around, getting breakfast. I had juice and a very small portion of cereal: that would be enough until after the race. I showered and dressed in the bronze shorts and black T-shirt of Spacer Bronze. I felt refreshed although I hadn't had a

full night's sleep. There was only a bruise on my cheek and a blue mark on my abdomen from last night's fight.

"Get a good rest?" Spacer Bronze asked me, his voicebox translating the clicks into speech.

"I'm feeling O.K.," I said, and meant it.

I was feeling -- well, eager. Funny, isn't it? The sensational racer of the New York area, the odds-on favorite to win the People-chase, the year's big race event -- and all I could think of was Spacer Saffron's blonde filly, whom I should have turned in to the authorities.

We motorcaded down to the starting grounds at nine o'clock, all the cars done up in flashy bronze for my Spacer's stables. All my stablemates went down, of course: they'd be cheering me on at the starting line and they'd take the course-paralleling highway by car to beat me to the finish line and greet me there.

A strange thing happened as the motorcade got underway. I shared the back of the biggest vehicle with Spacer Bronze and my two stable girls. One of them, a pert dark-haired teen-ager named Marie, got up and leaned forward to tell the driver something. Just then the car swerved to avoid hitting something, probably a rut in the un-

repaired surface of the road. Marie was thrown sprawling against me, most of her weight landing across my legs. I grinned at her and she grinned back. I helped her back into a sitting position. Then:

"You clumsy fool!" Spacer Bronze yelled at her, and struck her across the face with the little swagger-stick he always carried. Marie sobbed but said nothing: the swagger-stick left a welt from ear to jaw on the left side of her face.

"You could have hurt his legs, you oaf!" Spacer Bronze cried, and struck again with his stick. I caught it in mid-air; I don't know quite why. But I had seen Marie cowering, waiting for the blow and it was somehow, incredibly, as if this slim, frightened girl stood for more than herself, stood in some way I couldn't understand for all mankind. I picked the swagger-stick off in mid-air and broke it in front of Spacer Bronze's startled, wide-gaping mandibles. Then I threw the two pieces out the window.

"Jimmy!" Spacer Bronze said.

Marie looked at me. I'll never forget her eyes. I patted her hand and immediately Spacer Bronze had the driver stop our car. The whole motorcade rolled to a halt. "All right, you," Spacer Bronze told Marie: "Out."

"Out?"

"You're finished. We don't want you any more."

"But my family, sir. My little brother. He's with - - with your stables, Spacer."

"Get out."

Marie got up. There were tears in her eyes. A tear rolled down her cheek. "Just a minute, Spacer," I said.

"Yes, what is it?"

"She stays."

"Why, Jimmy? Why?" Spacer Bronze asked in a mild voice. It was the voice-box speaking, though. Spacer Bronze could make the voice-box register a mild voice if that was what he wanted. I had a hunch, though, he was ready to explode with anger.

"Because she's a human being," I said slowly, distinctly. "Not an animal."

Even the taciturn driver grunted his surprise. For a long time Spacer Bronze said nothing. Far away, a horn tooted as some vehicles wanted the right of way through our motorcade. Finally Spacer Bronze said: "It's the morning of the big race. I'll forget that. I'll forget what you said. You're excited."

"But she stays?"

"Yes. Yes, Jimmy. She stays." I could almost read his thoughts: she stays until after the race, but

then she gets hers - - and probably her kid brother, too.

I had called her a human being, almost without realizing it. That was a taboo. It was the one violent speech taboo we had. A man, a girl, a woman, fine. But not a human being. There was something too - - too dignified about that term. We couldn't apply it to ourselves.

Spacer Bronze looked at me. His lidless eyes said, clear as any words: you had better win that race today, Jimmy Keene. For the first time in my life, I knew that I hated Spacer Bronze and all he stood for.

Just after the motorcade reached the starting point and we all got out, I had a moment's opportunity to talk with Maria. "Will your kid brother be here?" I said.

"Yes, Mr. Keene."

"You're to cheer?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Keene. I want to thank - - "

"Never mind that now. Be with your brother at the finish line. The finish line, is that clear?"

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Keene!"

She knew there would have been hell to pay otherwise. And she was thanking me. Sure, thank the flashy racer, I thought. Only thing was, I didn't know myself what I was going to do about Marie or even myself.

AFTER THE band-playing ceremonies and the speech-making I saw Spacer Saffron's prize blonde filly at the starting line. She was wearing a kirtle and halter of his stable colors and a big cloak which she would not remove until just before the starting gun. She looked at me and I tried to keep my face blank. The blood went racing through me, though: she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I looked up at the tote board and studied the morning line odds. They rarely changed much. I was the favorite and five-to-three, and as the numbers flashed I saw I was getting a lot of action. Spacer Saffron's filly, whose name on the tote board was Evanne, was listed at eighteen-to-one. The second choice, a Chicago lad named Prince Philip, was a three-to-one shot. I looked down the line at him and saw a tall rangey fellow with a shock of red hair. He looked like he could run, but then, there was more to running the big New York Peoplechase than the mere ability to sprint or jog cross-country. For the course covered the old New York battleground from which the obstacles and barbed wire and trenches and tank traps and hidden pitfalls had never been cleared.

I thought of Evanne and the Wild Ones last night. I wondered who they were backing. I won-

dered how many of the entries had been bought off. Then I decided that they couldn't expect to buy off anything like the whole two dozen of us, so their boy had to be a pretty good runner himself. Prince Philip? I didn't think so, for three-to-one odds at the amount the Wild Ones could invest wouldn't bring them much of a return. After Prince Philip on the tote board there was a pretty big drop to a Spacer Saffron eighteen year old named Lysander who had won his first claiming race during the indoor winter season last February. He was listed at eight-to-one and I decided he was my man.

Being the favorite, I drew heavy weight of forty-five pounds. Marie and the other girl slung the harness across my shoulders and strapped it under my arms and over my chest and then Spacer Bronze came over. "Funny about that weight," he said.

"Why?" I asked him.

"Because I weigh exactly forty-five pounds, Jimmy. I'm going to take it as a favorable omen. Instead of sending one of our jockeys out on you, I think I'll ride this race myself."

"You, Spacer?" I gasped as he climbed into the saddle, sitting up near my shoulder blades and beating his gossamer wings against my head in a caress which I considered

suddenly and for the first time in my life obscene. I stood up. His weight was balanced there nicely: I hardly felt it. I moved over to the starting gate and took my place next to Prince Philip, who was pacing nervously back and forth, waiting for the gun.

"Steady, boy," his jockey said, wings beating. "Steady." Steady boy, I thought. Steady boy. Like an animal. All of us, like animals. But we were human beings. Weren't we? No, we were men, I knew suddenly. We wouldn't really have the right to call ourselves human beings unless we could regain our lost dignity. Maybe, I thought suddenly, the Wild Ones were human beings. I grinned. I couldn't help it. Yesterday I would have considered the Wild Ones as incarnations of evil, living in the wilderness and preying on the Spacer communities.

"Yes, I'm riding today," Spacer Bronze told me. "And I want you to know this, Jimmy: if you win the race, I won't do a thing about that girl Marie. But if you lose, she goes. Is that understood?"

It was understood, all right. My heart began to pound. I didn't know what to do. If I won the race, Marie would be all right. Marie and her little brother. But if I won, the Wild Ones didn't get the money which they needed

to maintain themselves not merely as men but as free-thinking, free-acting human beings in the face of the Spacer conquest. I had to win for Marie; I had to lose for the Wild Ones. But hadn't I told Marie to be with her brother at the finish line? Hadn't I planned to help them in some way? Some way, I thought bitterly. Exactly what could I do? I was hardly more than an animal . . . .

Just before the starting gun, Spacer Saffron's Eavan broke from the gate and came trotting over nervously in my direction. "If you can't control that filly," Spacer Bronze told Eavan's jockey, "at least keep her away from here!"

But Eavan came quite close and brushed against me, depositing something in my hand. Then she went calmly away under the beating wings and scolding voice-box of her jockey.

"That was a note, wasn't it?" Spacer Bronze asked me.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, read it."

Spacer Bronze, I knew, couldn't read English. Since I was literate - - a rarity these days among racers - - he'd wanted me to learn the Spacer language, but I hadn't. He hadn't learned mine, either. With trembling fingers I opened the note. Making up the words, I told him it was for a love-tryst

tonight, after the race. It seemed to satisfy him.

But I couldn't keep my hands steady. That wasn't what the note said at all. The note was in my father's hand-writing! My father was alive! The note said:

JIMMY - - IF YOU'D LIKE TO THINK OF YOURSELF AS A HUMAN BEING, LET SPACER SAFFRON'S LYSANDER WIN THE PEOPLECHASE. LYSANDER'S ONE OF US, A WILD ONE - - SOMETHING YOU OUGHT TO BE, TOO, IF YOU CAN GET THE DUST OF RACING GLORY FROM YOUR EYES. It was signed, DAD.

I tore the note into little pieces and let them drift with the wind. Then Eevanne's jockey brought her back to her section of the starting gate and the trumpet sounded. Seconds later the gate opened with a clang and we were off and running.

I JOGGED in a long-legged, ground-consuming stride down the first mile of the track. This was flat roadbed with no obstacles. The pack didn't spread much here: it wouldn't because all of the entries could run. Spreading would come once we reached the obstacles further uptown in the ruined city.

Instead of setting the pace, I let Prince Philip take an early

lead. I wondered if he had been approached by Eevanne or some of the other Wild Ones. I supposed that he had. I couldn't even feel it in my heart to blame the Wild Ones who had attacked me last night. They were human beings: that was most important.

Spacer Bronze leaned over my neck, coaxing me, beating his wings about my head, poking the chitinous joints of his rear limbs against my shoulder blades.

"Relax," I said. "We've got a long way to go."

We hit the first obstacles at the site of what used to be Greenwich Village and I went through the rubble quickly, expertly. A miss-step would mean a broken leg at least. I was amazed to see that Eevanne maintained the pace set by Prince Philip, Lysander, and myself. Then, at the bottom of a heap of rubble I came quite close to the golden-haired filly and I saw her eyes. I lost stride and almost fell. Spacer Bronze clicked frantically, forgetting to regulate the anger from his voice-box. But I didn't care about Spacer Bronze now.

Eevanne's eyes were clouded over. Eevanne had taken dope.

It figured, I told myself in a frenzy of anxiety. She wanted to see that Lysander won the race. Even if she placed one, two, or

three, she would be disqualified when they found the dope in her system, but that didn't matter. Lysander wouldn't be doped and Lysander was the one who mattered.

The minutes stretched into hours as we raced uptown over rubble and bomb craters, through the corpse of a dead city. We skirted the bigger craters and sped over the rubble and went down on our bellies under the barbed wire while our jockey dismounted and followed us. Once, after Spacer Bronze had dismounted, Evanne crawled close to me under a fifty-yard stretch of wire. The jockeys would follow - - airborne.

"Are you - - with - - us?" Evanne panted.

I looked at her wordlessly. Finally I said, "You took dope."

"I don't matter. I'll be all right. It - - wears - - out of the system. Are you?"

"Yes," I said. Until this moment I had not really known for sure what my answer would be.

"Prince Philip isn't. Take him out of the race," she said. Doped or not, her eyes were suddenly radiant. "Take him out before the finish line."

"I can't," I groaned, and told her about Marie.

She frowned, then her face lit up. "We human beings haven't

lost all of the old science," she told me. "I've a false tooth with a radio in it. I'll call our men at the finish line. They'll take care of this Marie, I promise you."

We got through the wire. We touched hands. I tingled all over.

"Will I see you?" I said.

"Yes, oh yes!"

Then Spacer Bronze flew down and mounted again and I was off and running.

I TOOK Prince Philip out of the race at the thirty-fourth street docks. It took a lot of doing. I came up behind the big Chicago entry near the ruins of the overhead expressway and suddenly went down low and hit him behind the knees with my shoulders. Spacer Bronze screamed: "Are you crazy? Are you crazy?" but I didn't pay any attention. His wings beat at my face, blinding me. Prince Philip rolled over angrily, his jockey leaving harness and hovering on beating pinions over our heads, clicking furiously, beating at my head with a small whip he carried, the haft striking me and the lash coiling about my neck. Prince Philip got up and looked at me and found a rock somewhere and hurled it. I ducked, but Prince Philip's jockey wasn't so lucky. The rock was the size of a man's fist. It struck the jockey's head and

crushed the chitinous skull. The jockey's wings stopped beating: the jockey was dead.

Prince Philip had a rock in his other fist. He held on to it and drove his fist at my face. I side-stepped and the rock slammed against my shoulder, numbing me. Prince Philip turned to run as Lysander and Ewanne and the other flashed by, none of them stopping.

"I command you in this, Jimmy!" Spacer Bronze clicked. "Stop this fighting! Run!"

His wings flashed in the sun and beat about my face. I took two big strides and caught Prince Philip by an arm and spun him around. He hit me in the face but I felt only a numbness, no pain. I drove my fist into his stomach and knew I had hurt him. He tried to clinch, then brought his knee up and down I went. He leaped toward me and lifted his foot to stamp down on my face. I caught his heel and twisted. He screamed once and fell down.

"My leg!" he screamed. "You broke my leg!"

He sat there, holding his leg, rage and pain contorting his face. That was all I had wanted from Prince Philip: he was out of the race for good now.

I sprinted away from there with Spacer Bronze shouting threats in

my ear. He kept it up for half an hour, but I was hardly listening. I overtook the pack but not the two front-runners, Lysander and the drugged Saffron filly, Ewanne. Then Spacer Bronze's tone changed: "You can do it, boy. Good boy! Good boy! See? You're running good now. We'll forget about that personal grudge fight you had. Yes, boy, we'll forget it. Come on, boy. Come on! There's a good boy. I'll buy you Spacer Saffron's golden-haired filly if you want! What do you say, boy? Come on, boy!" he urged. "Come on!"

I was an animal. I had been an animal all the days of my life. And now I wanted to be a human being. Spacer Bronze stood for everything in my animal existence. But he stood for more than that. He stood for security. He stood for wealth and a life of glory in my racing years and comfort when I grew older and was let out to stud and finally to pasture. I hated Spacer Bronze in that moment more than I have ever hated in my life. With his life of glory and comfort he had almost won: he had almost made me an animal. And now, I thought, what would an animal's reaction be? An animal would tear him apart, limb from limb.

I said, quietly, "Get off. Climb

out of that harness or I'll kill you. I mean it."

His wings beat for balance. He said nothing. His face came over my shoulder, the antenna quivering, the big lidless eyes staring. He stared at my face and must have seen what was in my eyes.

He shuddered and rose up out of the harness and flew off.

**T**HEY WERE waiting for me at the finish line. The Spacer Police. I saw them waiting even as I watched Lysander flash across the line first, ahead of Eavanne and two or three others who had managed to make it close. Lysander was plenty good: he could have beaten all of them legitimately, except Prince Philip and me.

I didn't cross the finish line. I ducked into the ruins a hundred yards short and lost myself in the maze of one of those big skyscrapers with a double shopping arcade on the street floor and in the basement. I heard their wings beating in the corridors, but they soon gave it up. Spacer Bronze must have been fuming, but after all I was only one domesticated animal and there were plenty others where I came from.

I waited until nightfall and then I got out of there. I was hungry and tired from the race and my fight with Prince Philip. I hadn't

been able to rest. I went along the deserted streets of the city which once had been one of the glories of my people, when we had called ourselves human beings proudly. The silhouettes of the deserted building stood gaunt and ghost-like against the moon as I made my way east. Not this generation, I told myself. But they will rise again. We're human beings. We will make them rise again.

Eavanne was waiting for me with a boat at the river. I had not expected that. I had been ready to swim. She came to me and although we hardly knew each other, we clung and kissed. Some things you didn't need time to know.

"Marie?" I said.

"We've got her, Jimmy. She's safe on Long Island."

We got into the boat. I rowed while Eavanne talked avidly of the colony of Wild Ones across the river. A growing colony. Which could use the money bet on Lysander toward the day when our cities would rise again. An expanding colony, like a hundred others across the face of the land. A colony that, with the others, would someday rise . . . .

When we got to the other side, my father was waiting. I went to him hand in hand with Eavanne. Somehow it was like coming home for the first time in my life.



# Build Your Own Robot!



THE striking success of the do-it-yourself craze has reached into every cranny of American activity.

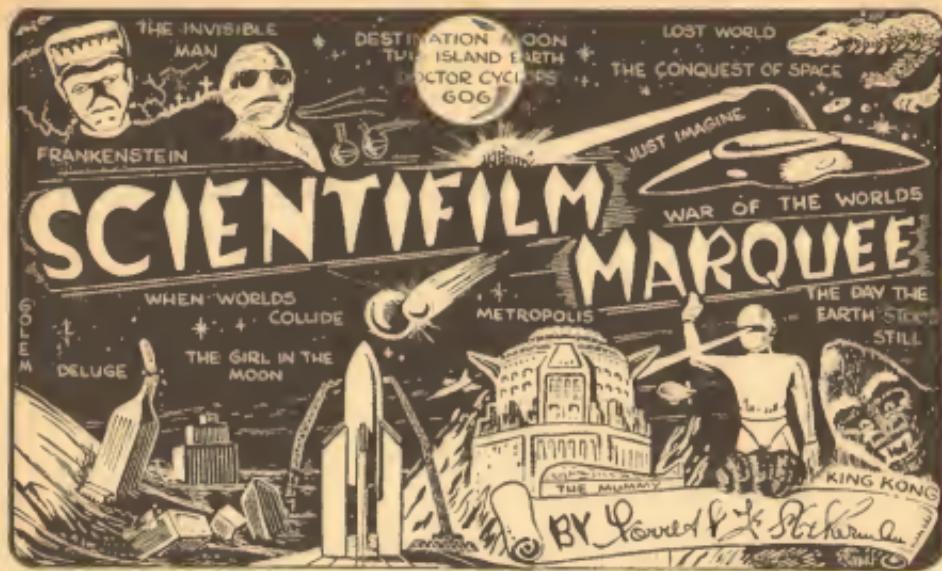
The same firm which provides so many tools for amateur radio enthusiasts has available—for about \$700!—an automatic computer, just like the big ones used in Universities and Industrial Research organizations. This computer, a maze of potentiometers, and vacuum tubes, can be assembled by anyone who can read a schematic wiring diagram. Once built, it is used precisely as one of the larger analogue

computers would be used.

The field of servomechanisms also has a do-it-yourself kit. Scientists and engineers who wish to experiment with the servomechanisms, no longer have to make each component of their project. A complete kit is offered—wheels, gears, servo-motors, bearings, and necessary electrical components. Schools and smaller industrial laboratories grab up these useful kits.

It wouldn't be surprising if someone soon comes out with a "go-to-the Moon-yourself" kit! The Amateur Rocket Societies testify to this.





## ON THE JET-PROPELLED COUCH and awa-a-y we go!

This was the major announcement made at the midnite soiree on deadline date of this department. The announcer, William Alland -- producer of Ray Bradbury's *It Came from Outer Space*, Ray Jones' *This Island Earth*, and Ray Gunn's *Tarantula*. The audience -- 25 hand-picked Pacificoast practitioners of the sci-fi arts and sciences, the invitees including AE van Vogt, G. Gordon Dewey, Ib Melchoir, Helen M. Urban, Frank Quattrochi, Raymond E. Banks, Gene Hunter, Charles Nuetzel, S. J. Byrne, George H. Smith, Jodi de Melikoff, Martin Vuerhard, Jerome Bixby and others. The place -- Hollywood, California; Scientifilm Center on Sherbourne Drive. The announcement, in case you missed it firstime 'round: the late Robert

Lindner's great tour-de-force, *The Jet-Propelled Couch*, read by millions in *Harper's*, *F&SF* and pocket-book form, and an overnite sensation in the Imagi-nation, has been optioned by Wm. Alland of Universal - International Studios! Franklin Coen, who did the cinedadaptation of "Island Earth", will very likely do the screenplay of "The J. P. Couch."

The bull session in my home between Alland and the authors lasted 7 hours, and during this time many plots and themes were discussed, from golems to parallel worlds. Alland's just-completed *Mole People* pictures an underground race of Sumerian survivors, 7-foot-tall milk-white albinos to whom the flashlight of an archaeologist from "above" has the deadly intensity of a raygun. Alland's next, *The Deadly Mantis*, will loose

a flying dragon with wing-towing span of 150 feet over New York.

Immediate results of the meeting with Alland: submissions to his office of "The Boy Who Saved the World", an original by Thad Swift; "Into the 4th Dimension" by Ray Cummings; "The Ghost" by AE van Vogt; "The Immortals" by Ralph Milne Farley; and THE BLIND SPOT by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint.

Comes Atomigeddon, how is St. Peter going to handle the crowds at the Pearly Gates? This is the imminent crisis confronting the Catastrophe Council up Topside in "This Way to Heaven", Harold M. Sherman's 50,000 word novel featured with cover in the October 1948 Fantastic Adventures and now sought as a screen property by Sherman A. Rose.

Roger Corman's 5th scientifilm, *Not of This World*, is before the cameras at Allied Artists as I write and for the 4th time Paul Blaisdell has created his alien menaces. Monsters in this one are hemo-goblins from Davanna, a planet where the blood is evaporating in the veins of the inhabitants who look to Earth for about 2 billion refills in handy economy size labeled "Humans."

Filming on *The Petrified Man* was scheduled to start in mid-July, *The Mysterious Island* the first week in Aug, *The 27th Day* (a British novel by John Mantley to be published in USA by Dutton) on 13 Aug, and, apropos for the same date (13th), *Killer Brain*, a Sam Katzman pseudoscience horror.

*Kronos, Conqueror of the Universe*, is a package that has been put together by a trio of special-effectsmen and aroused interest at RKO, the sleeping giant that is now rousing itself to produce pictures again. Speaking of sleeping, RKO has been drowsing for a quarter of a century over a giant book it bought in 1932 (Aldous Huxley just told me so!) and millions of moviegoers would flock, I'm sure, to see it if they'd get off the (moth) ball at the Studio and film it. It being BRAVE NEW WORLD. In the meantime, RKO will do a spacer to which it will attach one of 3 titles: *Project Vanguard*, *Satellite Station*, or *Around the World in 48 Minutes*.

**L**ONG ON THE SHELF at MGM, the beautiful short life-before-life novel by Mildred Cram, "Forever", is about to be dusted off as a co-starring vehicle for Eva Marie Saint and Gordon MacRae.

The British scientifilm hit, *Quatermass*, playing in this country as *The Creeping Unknown*, will have its sequel *Quatermass 2*, filmed in England. Wonder what they'll call it over here, *Creep No. 2?*

Man named Kaiser plans to script, produce and direct *The Keepers of the Earth* . . . Now here's a double bill for you: *The Day the Sun Grew Cold* and *The Night the World Exploded* . . . Sabre Productions has a property, "In the Depths of Space", by Edward O'Callaghan, who did the original screenplay for "This Island

Earth" . . . "Yesterday", a Spanish novel about prehistoric Mexico, is on Geo Pal's production schedule for "tomorrow".

The director of *Target Earth* has optioned a magazine story, "The Man Who Lived in a Well" by Frank Bernie, about a Magoo-sighted man who acquires X-ray vision from falling into a well with a weird mixture of minerals in the rocks at the bottom . . . Milner Bros' plans are heavy on the horror science, 4 titles having been announced: *From Hell It Came*, *The Headless Man*, *The Creature with 1000 Lives* and *The Last Man to Die* . . . Wm Alland is considering a screenplay by Mitchell Lifton & Geo Wald, "The Man Who Thought He Was Dead", based on an article by A. B. Gottlober, Ph.D.

From Italy comes word of a project, *Creation of the World* . . . Tom Gries plans to script and direct "Pigmy Island" by Edmond Hamilton from *Weird Tales* . . . Curtis Harrington's "Girl from Beneath the Sea", which Roger Corman will direct, is themed upon a real live mermaid . . . *Monolith* will present the spectacle of great columns of animated stone encroaching on mankind . . . *The Land Unknown* hopes to achieve a new verisimilitude in the presentation of prehistoric saurians by encasing men in dinosaur suits.

Vincent Price, who, if memory serves me right, many years ago began his cinematic career as the title character in *The Invisible Man Returns*, may be seen in another scientific film of an ambassador from a distant world called *The Diplo-*

*mat* . . . There once was a plan afoot to star Geo Raft in *Nautilus*, a science serial of today and tomorrow based on the development of the first atomic submarine, but the project never got off the ground -- or, in this case, the water. However, another George, named Fox, has pacted a client of mine, Richard Osenburg, to develop the *Bluebook* thriller, "Undersea Armada", which he had published under the pseudonym of Michael Laufer, into a full length novel which will be published as a book and then filmed by Geo Fox Productions. Fox, himself a sci-fi reader from the pregernsback or antediluvian era of Stf, is also interested in the potentialities of a certain Nelson Bond story I suggested to him, and a book classic of lunar romance on which an announcement is pending.

*Smiles of a Summer Night*, is a 110 min. Swedish fantasy film currently to be seen in the art-pix circuit, about an exhilarating elixir that causes people to throw off inhibitions and act somewhat thornesmithish . . . CVWhitney is prepping *The Road to Mars* . . . The Bridey Murphyarn at Universal is titled *I've Been Here Before* . . . Richard Carlson, himself a dyed-in-the-Wells fan, plans to do Judy May Dikty's successfully televised "Dune Roller" as a theatrical feature in *Japan!* Better look up Tetsu Yano, Dick.

From my Memo Pad: Thanks, Dave Watson, for the dope about Dick Matheson's potential sequel to *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *The Fantastic Shrinking Girl* . . . Save a red corpuscle for me, Jerry War-

ren, from your *Blood of the Beast Men* . . . Thanks for the invitation on set, Alex Gordon, of *The She Creature* . . . Good to see you again, Lou Place, on location of *It Conquered the World* . . . Merci beaucoup, monsieur Beaumont, for the info about your collaboration on *Invaders from 7000 AD* . . . Great idea, Ib Melchoir, about "The Sleeper" . . . Ta, Pandora Bronson, for your call about the jet-propelled *Werewolf* . . . And appreciation to you, Ed Spiegel, Ron Cobb and Don Grollman for suggestions for the column.

Watch for THE TIME MA-

CHINE, MAN FROM TOMORROW, Nth MAN, DARK DOMINION, ATLANTIS, TO WALK THE NIGHT, THE ADAPTIVE ULTIMATE, THE 9 BILLION NAMES OF GOD and (I'll take you up, Jim Nicholson, on your promise to introduce me to her) THE LAST WOMAN ON EARTH.

-Forrest J. Ackerman

SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE is a regular feature. Columnist Ackerman may be contacted via the Beverly Hills, Calif., telephone exchange by those having news items to contribute.



"Looks like Smedley took one nip too many of that rocket fuel!"

He had nothing left but instinct, and it told him he must take the weapons provided for him and kill. But to kill he must first find —

# The Last Enemy

by

*Robin Peters*

**H**E CAME CRAWLING from his cave when the sun broke through a jagged opening in the thick layer-on-layer of gray clouds.

He squinted up at the sun. He did not remember it. He had never seen the sun before. His skin was lividly white, as if he had spent all his time below the surface of the earth, in darkness. He was quite used to crawling and when he walked erect it was stiffly, the muscles of his body and limbs capable of but not used to the task.

I'm a man, he thought. A man, a man, a man. He shouted: "I'm a man!" Gray clouds swirled up and covered the sun again. A wind from the north howled across the bare rock and the rubble that had been a city, stirring the dust of destruction and memory.

What will I eat? he thought. There was no food anywhere on

the blasted, leveled surface of earth except for the concentrates in his cave, as far as he knew. But still, he had been bred to kill and an instinct which he did not fathom told him another creature walked the earth and he knew he would have no moment's peace until he found that creature—man or beast—and destroyed it.

The war had been over—as a war—when he was a very small boy. He had inherited the weapons-cave by default: there was no one else. Occasionally, as he had been trained, he had played his symphony of hate and destruction on the keyboard of the weapons panel and sometimes close by and sometimes so far away that only his instruments could record the fact, earth burst and airburst sent more choking gray dust into the sky, a planetwide shroud for the dying earth.



He trudged through the dust to a long flat strip of ground where the rubble had been cleared. Robot sweepers patroled back and forth there, removing the dust and debris as it settled from the sky, rolling tirelessly on frictionless bearings. Beyond the sweepers at one end of the level stretch—or runway—was the jetbomber.

He had been trained for this too,

as an infant, as a child, as a man. He went to the gleaming polished side of the jet and saw his reflection there. He was naked, and pale. He was young, he supposed. In the cave were pictures of men older than himself. He looked at his reflection again and smiled. The muscles of his face felt stiff. Shrugging, he found the smooth, almost seamless door in the skin of

the jetbomber, opened it, and went inside. It was dark in there, like the inside of the cave, but cleaner. He knew exactly how to pilot the ship, although he had never been inside one.

Words from his childhood training drifted back: "In the event that another human, an enemy, still exists in some remote place that cannot be reached by the remote control weapons at your disposal, the jetbomber is available. Instinct will lead you to the enemy. Your genes have been so conditioned . . . ."

He closed his eyes and touched something. The great jet engines of the bomber throbbed to vibrant life. The ship thundered and roared and his ears ached with the sound of it. He walked to the rear of the ship, which was crammed with food concentrates. Enough for a lifetime, for two lifetimes or more. That solved the food problem. Amidships was the bombay — and three H-bombs no bigger than his head.

He sighed contentedly and shut his eyes and let his instinct take over. East, his instinct said. East and south, but mostly east. The jetbomber shuddered and roared down the runway past the sweepers and into the air and the gray pall and then through the pall into blue sky which dazzled him.

Eastward he went, and south, toward another human, who still lived . . . .

**D**YNAMITE, she thought. It was, in a way, funny,

With all the weapons at womankind's disposal — or once at her disposal—it came down to dynamite. For while she was gone on a scouting trip something had happened in her store of H-bombs and when she returned there was a hole in the ground a hundred miles across where her base in mid-Europe had been.

She had found the dynamite outside the ruins of Cairo. The map told her it was Cairo, but hardly a stone stood on a stone to indicate where the city had been. All the cities of Earth were like that, she thought without bitterness. The women, in the beginning, had fought for the cities, had died by the millions to defend them. This was history, and one should not be bitter over history.

There had been renegade women, of course, who kept the men going, but had the men not bombed the cities the outcome of the war never could have been in doubt. The war, as war, was before her time. As a small girl she had been cast out into the wilderness and so had survived the final destruction of the cities. She won-

dered if there were others — other women who had survived the holocaust of the cities by fleeing to the wilderness. She doubted it: in the old days the cities had been ringed with steel and fire; it was difficult if not impossible to escape. Then was she the only woman left alive? It seemed a distinct possibility.

Dynamite, she told herself again, dragging the sticks of it carefully across the sand and into her ancient, propeller-driven airplane. She wondered if what she had was sufficient to destroy the pyramids.

No one had thought of the pyramids and, scouting, she had come on them — breath-takingly intact — quite by accident. The men destroyed the cities, the women destroyed the monuments of man. She had to blast the pyramids. Her life, from the moment she had seen them, was utterly dedicated to that. All else — as far as she had seen — was rubble. The pyramids alone were left as a gigantic granitic epitaph to man, the builder, man, the creator, man, the maker. Well, she would destroy them.

It was, of course, a sickness. She knew that and knowing it could not prevent it. The sickness had been diagnosed a hundred and fifty years before, in the twentieth century, after the destruction of the Third World War, the last of

the geographic war. It was a viral disease. Quite literally, caused by a virus, as polio or the poxes or some form of pneumonia were caused by a virus. This was the virus of collective hatred and mutual destruction and an inability to live for long in peace. Actually and literally, a virus. It explained man's history better than all the historians and all the philosophers of history and all the anthropologists. Man hated man and hunted man and killed man through all the ages — as other animals did not hate and hunt and kill their own species — because of a virus which attacked him and produced this toxic symptom.

The virus had been isolated immediately after World War Four, which had been a badly organized conflict on the level of universal revolution. Then, somehow, the virus had mutated, and the Fifth World War, which had never stopped and would not stop until the entire surface of the earth was radioactive dust, had begun. It pitted man against woman in a senseless orgy of destruction. Women in the city, man in the wilderness. The mutual destruction had been virtually complete; there might be wild creatures still alive in the hills and the deserts of earth, but in her explorations she had never encountered any. Those

whom the bombs had not destroyed, the radioactivity had.

Neither man nor woman had won.  
The virus had won.

And, ironically, lost. Her viral counter had established that fact for years now. The virus, like man, could not withstand radioactive poisoning. For the first time in man's history, the virus of hatred and warmaking was gone—but mankind had been all but destroyed and would never survive to inherit his Utopia of universal peace.

Besides, the virus—dead now—had still left its imprint on her. She had had the sickness. She felt this consummate urge to destroy man and man's works as man had destroyed woman and the cities, symbol of the hearth and home, of womankind. Well, she thought, so be it. There was no sense in fighting the viral influence now, anyway: apparently the race would not be propagated.

She loaded the last of the dynamite into the ancient airplane which miraculously had survived a hundred years of holocaust and soon flew over the endless sands toward the pyramids which were the first of man's monuments to his own might and pride . . .

**H**IS INSTINCTS had led him to the ruins of a city which

the maps named as Cairo, Egypt. But the city was rubble, less than rubble, and he was airborne moments after landing and looking about. South again, he told himself . . .

He came upon the pyramids quite suddenly from an altitude of ten thousand feet. He soared once above them and then came back into the wind, putting the jetbomber on bomb-run. He did not know what the pyramids were: his immediate ancestors, cave-bound and fighting a war with push-buttons and feedback controls, had lost all knowledge of history and culture. To him the pyramids were some strange form of city, and as such had to be destroyed.

For an instant he questioned it, and the questioning surprised him. He had never questioned before. Never. There were cities. You destroyed them. If there were no cities, you still searched. It was like a sickness, but it was the sickness of all the days of your life, and you did not fight that. How could you?

Then how could he question? As if, somehow, the sickness was leaving him . . .

The biggest of the three pyramids swept toward the crosshairs of the bombsight. There would be no button to press. It would all be automatic . . .

At the last possible moment, he yanked a handful of wires loose and the vision in the bombsight blurred and distorted.

And no bomb fell.

For he had seen something else down there. Jetbomber? No, too small. Something like a jetbomber though, on the ground near the pyramids.

Had a man flown it here?

A woman?

He had never seen — or remembered seeing — a woman. He had seen no man, no other man, since his earliest childhood. He could not destroy what was below him until he saw. He brought the jetbomber down in a wide lowering circle toward the archaic airplane and the pyramids . . .

**S**HE HAD PLANTED her dynamite in two of the dusty, musty, cool pyramids and set the fuses when she saw the jetbomber soaring overhead. She recognized it at once from the pictures she had seen. It was a jet-plane, a ship-of-war, one of a type the men used to bomb the women's cities.

Danger!

She ran to her airplane as the jetbomber circled overhead. If it dropped a bomb she was finished, she knew that. If it went away . . . but it wouldn't go away. She jumped into the single-prop plane,

glared up defiantly through the cockpit canopy — and saw that the jetbomber was coming down.

A man? she wondered. It had to be a man. Not one of the wild ones who might have been left in woods and deserts, but a man from the caves, a man whose mission it was to destroy her. Man against woman, the ultimate war which made the furtherance of the human race impossible, the final holocaust in which the virus had conquered and, conquering, died by radioactivity.

She took her rifle and sprinted from the plane to the nearest pyramid. The enormous stone stairs loomed and she climbed them, toiling in the hot haze, until she found the entrance . . .

**T**HREE WAS no one in the airplane's small cockpit, but in the storage compartment behind the cockpit he found a case of dynamite. He stood for a moment indecisively. Man — or woman?

He climbed down from the plane's wing and stood staring across the sand. It was hot and dry, but the sun was obscured in the worldwide pall of black cloud. Hardly any wind blew — a rarity here on the desert although of course he did not know that.

He saw her footprints in the sand.

Returning to the jetbomber, he secured a pistolbelt around his waist, checked the clip of ammo, and went back to the footprints. They headed in a straight line for the nearest of the three pyramids and he followed them in a low running crouch.

Suddenly rifle fire banged up ahead and two bullets whined close over his head. He really ran now, taking giant strides to bring him under the cover of the huge stone steps which made up the pyramid. The rifle banged again. Bullets whined. Whoever was up there had seen him—and fired. Then it must be a woman, he decided. He waited for the enormous hatred to engulf him, to push everything else from his mind and emotions, but it did not come. Confused, frowning, he ducked down at the base of the first step and waited.

She had seen him. For a breathtaking moment his unadorned form had been in the sights of her rifle, although at considerable distance, and she had fired. The firing had been almost an automatic response, yet she felt none of the mind-clouding hatred which the virus once had inspired in all women. Almost, although she did not let herself call it that, she felt a kind of curiosity instead of the hatred. This was a man. Yes, this

was a man. But what was a man like? She had never seen a man up close before: except for the earliest days of the war, when the men had been expelled from the cities and the women from the wilderness encampments, this had not been a close-contact war. So she was curious—but did not own up to her curiosity. She waited now in the caye-like vault. It was dark in there, and cool. He was hiding now, not sure where the rifle fire came from. But presently he would explore the base of the pyramid, then the first step, and the second, and the third . . .

When he reached the sixth step, in which the vault was located, she would kill him.

**H**E WAS VERY CAREFUL. She was up there biding somewhere, he knew that. If he showed himself, he would die. If he remained where he was she could descend the other side of the pyramid and fly over it in her airplane and drop the dynamite on it, killing him. He himself might try to return to the jetbomber and use one of the H-bombs, but she had fired at him on the approach and could probably do the same on the retreat. It was thus imperative that he find her.

He fired his pistol twice. That would lead her to believe he was

exploring and thought he had seen her. Thus she would not attempt, at least for the while, to make her way back to the airplane and use it.

Satisfied for the moment with what he had done, he waited until dusk. Darkness came slowly over the desert because the pall of smoke and clouds held and reflected the light of the sun which rarely showed its face. When it was almost completely dark he climbed the first step and made a slow and cautious exploration of it, feeling his way along, half-walking, half-crawling. He did not think she was out in the open on one of the steps. His guess was a niche, perhaps a cave. He crawled along carefully, feeling for it.

He reached the second step. And the third, fourth, fifth . . . There was nothing. The going was slow, the steps gigantic. By the time he reached the sixth step dawn was reddening the East. He did not have much time now, he knew. He was tired, and he was hungry. Still he could not return to the jetbomber for food. She could pick him off with her rifle from her hiding place. He had to find her. If he waited through the light of day until the second night, he would be further weakened from thirst and starvation. If he sought her now in the increasing light, she might

hide in wait and kill him. But he had to chance it. He began to inch along the sixth step . . .

**S**HE COULD BARELY keep her eyes open. Naturally, she could not chance sleep. If she were in his position, she reasoned, she would search under cover of darkness. She wondered if that meant it would be reasonably safe to sleep when full daylight came. She did not know, but might have to chance it.

All at once she heard a scuffling, scraping on the rock. All her senses were instantly alert and she checked to see if a round was in the chamber of the rifle. He was coming. There wasn't any doubt about it. She stood with the complete darkness of the vault behind her, with her back against an outcropping of stone. She was three feet in from the entrance and commanded a view of the stone step's five-foot wide surface for a distance of several yards in each direction. She was bound to see him before he saw her. When she did, she would pull the trigger. It was as simple as that.

★ ★ ★

Now it was growing lighter rapidly. He did not like that at all. It meant danger. He was sweating in the sultry heat of dawn, and the sweat stung him. His tongue was

dry and, he thought, swollen from thirst. He held the pistol in his right hand, off safety, ready to fire it. He still felt no hatred, and that surprised him. Well, perhaps when he saw her . . .

★ ★ ★

He came into view quite suddenly, perfectly centered in the sights of her rifle. He was tall and very white of skin and the muscles rippled under his skin as he walked. He looked very strong. Pull the trigger, she told herself. Go ahead and pull the trigger. You only have a few seconds before he becomes aware of you. He's armed, isn't he? Pull the trigger, you fool!

But all she did was shoot the pistol from his hand when he was two steps from the vault entrance.

★ ★ ★

He felt the quick throbbing blast of impact as the bullet wrenched the pistol from his grip. The hand-weapon clattered on the stone step and then bounced over the edge. His thoughts raced. If he ran, she could step out of hiding and shoot him in the back. If he stood still he was also as good as dead. He had to go forward, quickly, quickly! His life and the success of his lifelong mission depended on that.

His mission? What did his mission matter now? He thought of his mission and experienced only—emptiness . . .

He ran forward.

Two quick strides — and he saw the cave entrance. He plunged into darkness and her voice called out:

"Stop. Stand still, or I'll kill you."

His eyes were not accustomed to the darkness. He could barely see her. She was a slender shadow, smaller than himself. She carried a rifle. He stood still, half a dozen feet away, and waited.

★ ★ ★

The rifle, like an airplane, was extremely ancient. She did not know how old it was, but it wasn't even automatic. It was an old bolt-action rifle of a type in use almost two hundred years ago.

The man was silhouetted against the light outside. Still, she felt no hatred. Rather, a sense of obligation to all of womankind, to the millions, to the hundreds of millions of women who had perished at the hands of his kind . . .

She swung the muzzle at him and got him squarely in her sights and—somewhat reluctantly—pulled the trigger.

The rifle clicked.

She cried out and swung the barrel at his head as he came for her. She had forgotten to ram the bolt home and the rifle had not fired.

THE IMPACT of the rifle barrel drove him to his knees but

he groped out blindly for it and felt the cool metal in his grasp and yanked it. For a moment she stumbled against him, but he twisted savagely at the rifle and tore it from her grasp. With a cry she turned and fled deeper within the vault.

Dazed, he stood up. He looked at the rifle and did not understand its mechanism. He flung it aside and vowed he'd kill her with his bare hands. Then he ran into the vault after her.

She plunged ahead in darkness, not knowing where she fled, only knowing that she had to get away. There were no branching passages. If there were, she might have lost him. There was only the single tunnel—lit, she now realized, by a faint radioactivity of the rocks—plunging into the bowels of the pyramid. The radioactivity would not harm her, she knew that. She was a mutant. She would not have survived this long if she was not. Was he a mutant too? She nodded grimly. He too had survived.

She stumbled and fell, striking her head. She cried out instinctively and felt the warm blood on her face. His footsteps pounded behind her. She got up and ran.

Ahead there was a narrow branching tunnel. She reached it. A rock was suspended there, precariously perched on a small ledge.

There was a narrow space which she tried to squeeze through, but could not. The rock seemed to be balancing so precariously that she might be able to swing it aside. She attacked it with her bare shoulder. Overhead, there was a rumbling sound. It soon increased in volume. She screamed as dust and then pebbles and then small rocks and then larger rocks began to sift down . . .

★ ★ \*

He lunged at her as the rocks fell, and pushed her through the narrow opening, stumbling through behind her. He had moved forward without thinking when he saw the rocks falling.

Fool! he thought. Fool: she would have been crushed there. She would have died. You saved her . . .

They were sealed off in a small chamber. It smelled musty. There was a table-like rock off to one side.

She came at him abruptly, clawing, striking out with fists and elbows. "You saved my life!" she cried. "Why? Why? I have to kill you!"

They grappled and although she was surprisingly strong and fought for her life and for everything she believed or thought she believed, he was very much stronger. He soon overpowered her and forced

her down on the floor, his strong hands about her neck.

He thought, his fingers closing, I don't hate her. I really don't. But I have to kill her—don't I?

Her neck was soft. She did not struggle. Her skin was smooth. Her eyes looked at him, quite calmly, accepting death because she could not prevent it. The last man and the last woman and the end of the human race . . .

"I — I saved your life back there," he said. "I don't know why."

She just looked at him.

He said finally: "I can't kill you. It's wrong, but I can't."

He took his hands away, and stood up. She climbed to her feet unsteadily.

"Are you all right?" he said.

The walls glowed. She was beautiful.

On the table-like rock were two mummies, covered with the near-

dust of their ancient finery and with precious gems. Their face masks were intact. One was of a man, the other of a woman.

"They built this monument," she said, "five thousand years ago, so they might love each other through all eternity."

"I know of no monuments," he said.

"Don't you understand?" she said. "Man and woman together, they made this. Not destroyers—but creators. I'm not sick now. The sickness is gone."

"Come," he said.

They felt a stirring of air. Beyond the table of rock was another passage, and a way out.

They touched hands. It was like an electric shock to him. And it was as if the dead man and woman on the table of rock had waited patiently through five thousand years of death and destruction for this moment . . .



## *Rocket Landings*



NO special maneuver will be more difficult than landing a rocket ship. Already this theoretical operation occupies more thought and discussion than that ancient philosophical problem of counting the number of angels who could dance on the point of a needle!—and it is a harder problem! Landing a rocket on the Moon or an-

other planet amounts to balancing that rocket on a finger of flame, a trick requiring more than manual skill.

As a rocket comes in to land, it faces this basic problem; by virtue of its height above the surface of the planet, it possesses gravitation potential energy and by virtue of its speed it possesses kinetic en-

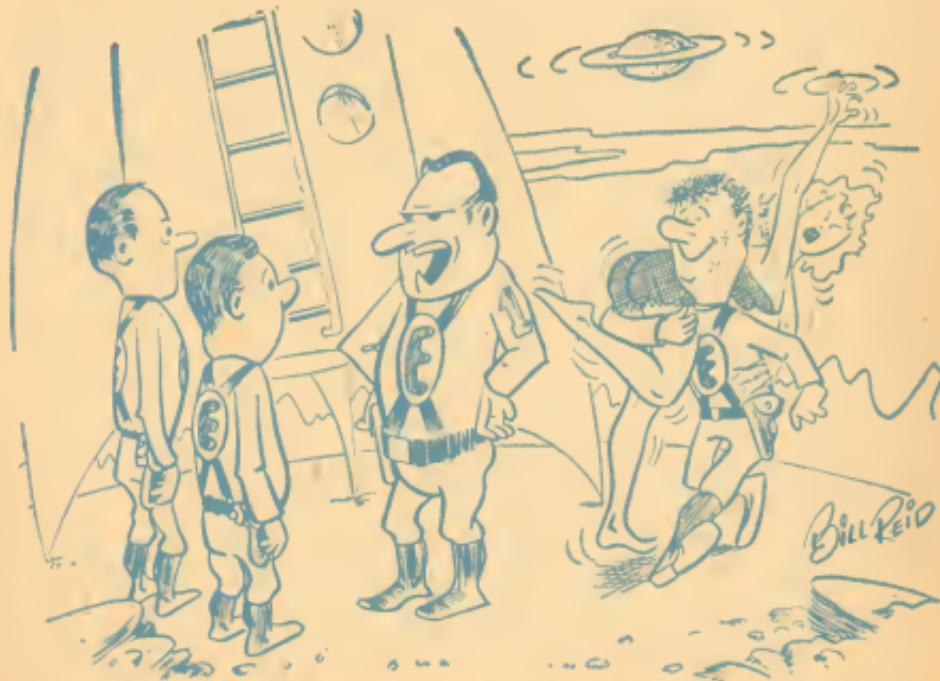
ergy. Both of these energies must be dissipated and cancelled perfectly by an equal amount of energy from the rocket motor. The job is so tricky that it has been compared with catching a hard-thrown egg on a glass plate!

A gyroscope of course can hold the landing rocket erect. This fact enables the pilot to concentrate on two things: adjusting his rocket thrust precisely and on balancing his energy expenditure against his kinetic and potential energies. Undoubtedly the major portion of the operation will be automatic, the rockets being controlled by reflect-

ed radar pulses. But in the last minutes or seconds of landing, the human pilot will play a role. Eventually perhaps even this role may be eliminated but the first rockets will have to use that most compact of calculating machines—the human being!

Anyone who has ever seen a picture of a rocket, a big one like the V-2, taking off, has also seen a rocket landing. It's simply a matter of visualizing the operation, in reverse. The first moment when the rocket appears to float on flame, is the last moment also . . .

★ ★ ★



"I want a sample of everything on this planet."

# THE RUNAWAY

by

*Ivar Jorgensen*

**Johnny was fed up with supervision; out in space a guy could do as he pleased and make himself a name — the only catch being survival!**

**H**E WAS ANGRY; angry with Mom and Dad and the whole kaboodle; as angry as a twelve-year-old can get when he's been given a rough time. There was the thing of his not putting his dishes into the incinerator shoot after his lunch. "Johnny, I've told you a thousand times — !" Well, darn it, can't a kid forget? And ordering a toy blaster over Dad's new materio-transfer beam. Real fun, that; typing the order onto the electronic beam to Field's big department store and then watching the gun materialize out of nothing on the little delivery platform. "Young man — I told you to stay away from that transfer unit. If you want something, I'll order it for you, but the unit is not a plaything!"

Those things and a lot of others, piling up from day to day until a guy just couldn't stand it any-

more. So he was going to run away. He'd show them. After he had organized a big robber gang out in some far galaxy and come blazing in with his men in a big space bender — then they'd be sorry!

So this was it. He'd been pushed too far. He was going . . .

The big freight station on Upper Level South always gave Johnny a thrill. The smells; the bustle of activity; the strange men and creatures from a dozen galaxies who rousted the freight; the pilots and astrogators, hard-eyed and bitter usually, from being too old for the fine, shining passenger benders or not good enough to make the grade.

It was to the freight station that Johnny went, of course, avoiding the vast passenger depot at the other end of the city because there, they'd pick up a lone kid trying to board a bender in just about nothing flat.



At the freight station, there was a chance of paying, maybe — some roustabout who was on the make for Terran coin.

As it happened, Johnny didn't have to pay. He was loitering on

a platform where they were loading a big, space-scarred bender, when the foreman went inside the hold. The clerk came running out with a memo and scowled after the foreman. Then he said, "Take it

in to him, will you, son?" and handed Johnny the memo.

The foreman took it without a thank-you and there was Johnny, inside the space bender with nobody caring one way or another. He got behind a packing case and sat down to wait.

After a while, he knew the bender was being trundled into the sending tube and he was a little frightened because now, there was no turning back. He consoled himself with a glowering thought: *Anyway, even if I never come back, they'll be sorry.* This aspect gave him comfort as he visualized both Mom and Dad, ancient and wizened, going to their graves still extremely sorry they'd driven their fine young son from his home.

Thus strengthened, he turned his attention to the bender. It had stopped moving. The sending tube had always fascinated Johnny; how a ship could be brought to such speed in so short a distance. His father had once tried to explain to him the technical factors of fourth dimensional travel; how it was necessary to "bend" space in order to move a ship over distances measured in light years. That way, the ship didn't really travel the distance. Rather, the destination was brought to the ship. Another way to illustrate was to show one man walking several

miles to get around a fence with another man stepping through it and reaching the same destination instantly. Johnny didn't understand any of this very well. He only knew that when the big space bender came out the upper end, you couldn't see it. Some of the kids said it didn't really come out at all — that material transfer was the key. But Johnny's father said that wasn't true.

Anyhow, Johnny waited all tensed up, to be thrown against the wall. Nothing happened and he wondered if maybe the bender wasn't going to let loose. The tension increased until he was holding his ears and squeezing his eyes tight shut . . .

"What the hell you doing here?"

A hand touched Johnny's shoulder and he jumped back, opening his eyes to find that the seediest roustabout he'd ever beheld was scowling down at him. "I'm — I want to go to — wherever you're going," Johnny babbled. "Don't throw me off — please. I'll pay!"

The roustabout wore only a skimpy pair of shorts and his skin was burned almost black. "You're already there, kid. Come on out."

He took Johnny by the shoulder and hauled him out an open ramp. Johnny's eyes popped at what lay before him. A huge, bleak metal shed under a blazing hot

sun. Two weird looking creatures, the like of which he had never seen — green-scaled, entities with arms and legs and a pair of something in the middle that could have been used for either.

The Terran roustabout said, "Look what I got here."

The green ones regarded Johnny with wonder. One of them asked, "Where's he consigned?"

"No place. He stowed away."

Johnny was busy with his own amazement. This sprang into panic as he discovered that the bender he'd come in was not there. A whole inner section from the storage pits had been pushed out onto the ground beside the warehouse. "Where — where's the ship?"

"On its way — where do you think?" the roustabout said. "They don't sit around all day."

The green men stamped the ground in anger. "Not consigned. That means reports — paperwork. Maybe inspectors coming out."

The roustabout considered this and scowled. "Yeah — sure, but not if he ain't here."

"But he *is* here."

"Yeah, sure — but he won't be in two hours."

"You mean — ?"

The roustabout grinned. "Sure — bump him onto the Centauri feeder ship."

He took Johnny by the arm again.

His grip was not too gentle. Johnny pulled away in fright. "What you going to do with me?"

"It's all right, sonny. You just get into that shell over there and stay quiet. Another bender'll come along pretty soon. The shell goes aboard and you in it."

"What place is this?"

"Korfax V — in Taurus."

"How — how far is that from Terra?"

The roustabout grinned. "Only a few hundred thousand light years, sonny. You figuring on walking back?" He pushed Johnny. "All right. Get back in there and be quiet. Johnny did what he was told. He sat in darkness a long time . . .

A TERRIFYING snakelike creature hauled Johnny out of the shell. It made a noise that sounded like laughter. A second blast of heat hit Johnny's face, but different, this time; wet, sticky heat that seemed to rise up from the earth under the steaming jungle around the shell. There was the inevitable sending tube and the bare shell of a warehouse but nothing else except thick, stifling tropical forest that appeared to be reaching in on all sides toward the cleared area.

Johnny strained back. The creature jerked him roughly. Johnny

screamed and a man appeared around the corner of the shell. He was a huge, blonde Martian — a type seen frequently on Terra. Johnny screamed, "Help — help!" and the Martian ran forward and kicked the snake creature viciously. It snarled, seemed about to attack, then slithered away, snapping its crimson tongue in frustration.

"He'd of hauled you into the jungle and eaten you, youngster!" The Martian said. "You ought to know better than to let a Santro get his claws on you."

Johnny was crying. "I never saw one before. He grabbed me."

"What you doing here, anyhow?"

"They — they sent me from Korfax Five or Six or something."

"How'd you get there?"

"I was a stowaway I guess. I was in the freight station on Terra and then —"

"Somebody ought to be fired — letting you get through. Now what am I going to do with you?"

"Can — can I go back to Terra?"

"No. There isn't a bender for two days and if I keep you here that long I'll have to make out reports."

"That's what they said on Korfax."

"We've got one going back to Ganymede as soon as we transfer the load. I'm stowing you on that.

Maybe they got something going to Terra."

"And if they haven't?"

"Then they've got a headache — you. I ain't never seen you — remember that. You never even got out of the shell . . ."

A fat, befurrowed native did the honors on Ganymede. He had no knowledge of Terran, but the implication was plain. He didn't want to make out any reports. He gave Johnny a bowl of thick, evil tasting soup before he rousted him back into the shell.

"Where am I going?" Johnny asked tremulously.

The Ganymedian grunted and shrugged and that was that . . .

Johnny saw the door of the shell slide back again and approached it fearfully. What dreadful kind of creature would be waiting for him now? Footsteps sounded and Johnny shrank back into the darkness. A man walked by. Johnny emerged as soon as he'd passed and would have made the door but his foot slipped causing a sharp sound.

The man turned. It was the Terran foreman. He scowled. "You still around here? You kids know you aren't allowed in the loading station."

Johnny gulped. "Sorry, sir — I was just going."

"Well do it then. And keep right on going. It's dangerous for kids

in here."

"Yes sir — yes sir."

JOHNNY SLIPPED in the kitchen door and headed for the refrigerator. He got a piece of cold meat and gulped it down as he went on into the living room. Mom was listening to a story tape. She opened her eyes.

"Johnny! You know better than to eat so close to dinner-time. How

many times do I have to tell you?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. I forgot."

"You're always forgetting. Where have you been?"

"No place, Mom. I was just — "

"Go clean up and get ready. Your father will be home before long."

"Yessum." Johnny gulped the last of his meat and hurried off to obey.

There was no place like home.



"Can't we talk this over in a civilized manner?"

# No Trap For The Keth

by

*Ralph Burke*

**DeVeeri had only one chance for his life; he had to get back to his space ship before the Vegan caught him. That is, the Vegan's tracker!**

**I**N A ROCKY GORGE deep in the desert wastes of Antares VII, Lieutenant James DeVeeri worked frantically to save his own life. It was hot inside his space-suit, but the heavy concentration of sulfur dioxide in the air forced him to wear it. A trickling rivulet of perspiration ran maddeningly down his face.

As he constructed the deadfall he was building, he stopped occasionally to listen for the sounds of the alien who was trailing him. So far, he had heard nothing, but he knew the Vegan was not far behind.

The red glare of Antares illuminated the desolate landscape, making the rocks and sand look as though they had been washed in blood. DeVeeri worked quickly and efficiently. There was no time to waste.

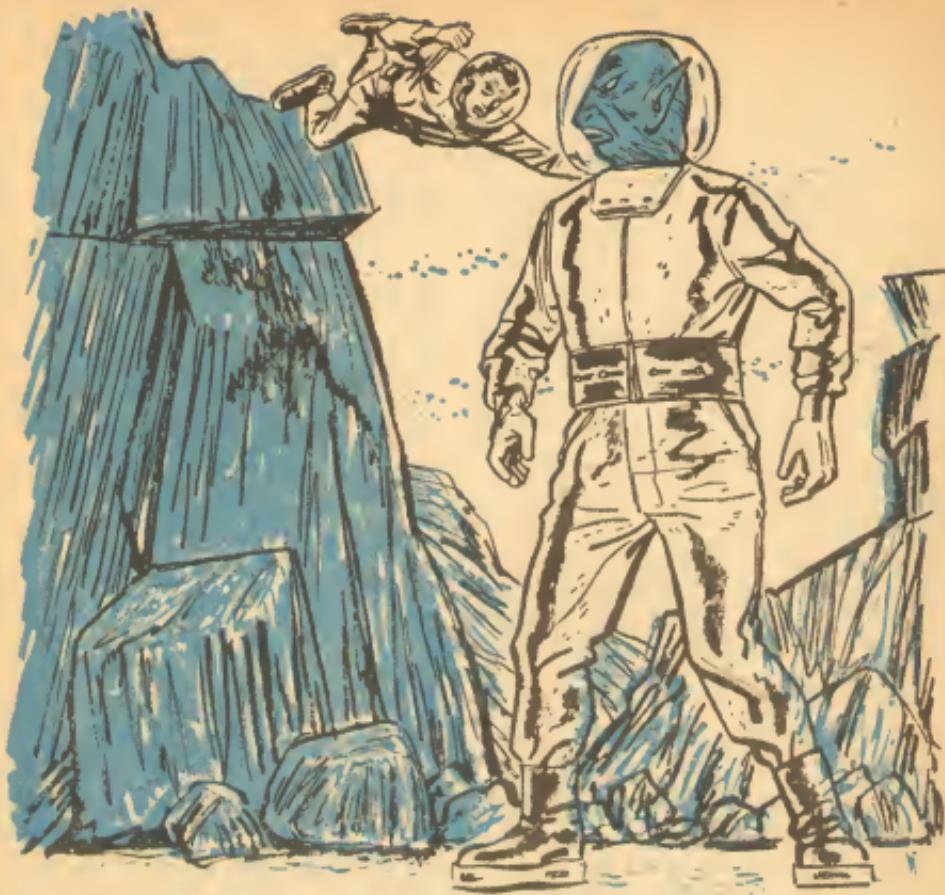
It was the natural pit in the

middle of the path which had given DeVeeri the idea of trying to trap his pursuer. Moving quickly, he had broken off several of the brittle branches of a nearby thorn bush and built a cover over the pit. Now it was nearly finished. He camouflaged it with rocks and sand and, surveying his handiwork, nodded and ducked away to conceal himself in a niche in the canyon wall.

He started to wait.

"How's it going?" said a metallic voice in his helmet. It was Darius, the computer-robot, somewhere up ahead in his ship. The computer-robots were equipped with personalities and speech; it made life in the one-man ships more bearable. "Think you're going to get out of it?" Darius asked.

"If I don't, you'll be left out there to rust," DeVeeri said. "By the time anyone thinks of looking



for my ship, you'll be so much scrap iron, Darius."

"I'm not worried," the robot said. "These aliens can be fooled."

"Glad you're so confident," DeVeeri said grimly. Then he heard a noise, and clicked off the chin-mike with a motion of his jaw. The Vegan was approaching.

His blue skin looked almost

black in the reddish light. He kept looking up warily at the canyon walls, well aware that DeVeeri might try to drop something on him from above.

A few yards ahead of the Vegan prowled the hunting *keth*. The *keth* was even more dangerous than the Vegan. It was a multilegged, synthetic form of life about the size

of a large dog. It looked like a combination of a spider, an octopus, and a baboon, and it had only one thought in mind when it was activated: *hunt, find, and kill!*

Lieutenant DeVeeri pressed himself back into the niche even further, trying to flatten himself against the rock. It meant death if the Vegan saw him first.

THE VEGAN was at a slight disadvantage in that he couldn't see as well as the Earthman. The Vegan was used to a bluer, brighter star than Sol, and the bloody light of Antares was even dimmer to him than it was to the Earthman.

But the Vegan had advantages that greatly outweighed his weakened sight. He had a charged J-pistol in his hand, and neither he nor the *keth* needed sleep. DeVeeri, on the other hand, had an empty weapon, and felt just about ready to drop from exhaustion.

Unless he did something drastic, DeVeeri knew he would be dead long before he reached the little one-man space scout that was his objective.

Closer and closer, the two hunters approached the concealed pit. The semi-intelligent *keth* snuffled at the ground and moved forward, scuttling across the ground like some monstrous tarantula.

If the Vegan won, Earth would lose another round in the long, drawn-out battle for interstellar supremacy. In the pouch at his side, Lieutenant DeVeeri carried the stolen scrambler code for the Vegan subradio communications. Four days before, the Earthman had surprised the hidden Vegan outpost, killed one of the Vegans, blasted their spaceship, and taken the code book. The remaining Vegan had managed to escape and take up the Earthman's trail.

The Vegan wanted only two things: to kill DeVeeri and to find where the Earthman had hidden his ship. But, DeVeeri reflected, the second wasn't half as important as the first. The Vegan was willing to die on Antares VII if he could stop the Earthman from taking the codebook back to Earth.

"What's going on?" Darius demanded tinnily.

DeVeeri switched his chin-mike back on. "Keep your relays cool, you overgrown adding machine. Things are starting to break now, and I don't want you bothering me."

"If that's the way you want it," the robot said. His rasping voice held overtones of wounded pride. DeVeeri heard the cutoff switch click sharply, and knew the robot had tuned out. He turned his attention to the two hunters be-

low.

*Damn!* Angrily, DeVeeri saw that the *keth* was going to reach the trap first! A short fall like that wouldn't hurt the beast any, and it would soon climb out of the pit. Lieutenant DeVeeri grasped a stone in his fist, ready to take any advantage that the situation might offer.

The *keth* came to the edge of the pit, sniffed around, and stepped out onto the brittle covering that disguised the trap. With a rending crash that seemed abnormally loud in the dense atmosphere, the covering collapsed, carrying the beast with it into the pit.

At almost the same instant, DeVeeri's hand shot out, throwing the stone with an accuracy that any baseball pitcher could have been proud of. Without waiting to see whether his pitch had reached its mark, the Earthman hurled himself desperately down at the Vegan.

IT MUST HAVE seemed as if everything were happening at once to the unfortunate alien. In one flashing instant his *keth* dropped into a concealed pit, a hard-thrown rock slammed against his J-gun, knocking it from his hand, and the space-suited body of the Earthman slammed hard against him.

The two of them rolled over

in the sandy dust of the little gorge, each trying to gain an advantage over the other. DeVeeri had his knife out, but the Vegan's powerful hand was clamped about his wrist, preventing him from stabbing. As they rolled over, thrashing about on the rocks, DeVeeri heard a scrabbling sound from the pit. His skin went cold. The *keth* was climbing out!

In desperation, the Earthman twisted the knife downward, aiming at the Vegan's wrist. At the same time, he brought his knee up into the Vegan's stomach. The alien twisted a little, and his grasp faltered just enough. The point of the knife bit into the fabric of the spacesuit at the Vegan's wrist. The acidly corrosive atmosphere of Antares VII began to seep into the Vegan's suit.

Neither an Earthman nor a Vegan can hold his breath and fight at the same time, and soon the biting fumes were doubling up the Vegan in great, racking coughs. He gave up fighting and tried to hold his breath. In that instant, DeVeeri's knife plunged into the Vegan, mercifully ending his life.

"One down," he said triumphantly, and leaped to his feet. He turned toward the pit. The *keth* was hanging on the edge, slowly climbing out. It had evidently bruised itself a little in the fall.

A *keth*, having no sensory neurons for the purpose, felt no pain, but the injury had slowed the monster down.

DeVeeri picked up the fallen Vegan's J - pistol, took careful aim at the *keth*, and pulled down on the firing stud.

Nothing happened.

"I'll be damned," DeVeeri said. His aim had been better than he thought. The rock that had knocked the weapon out of the Vegan's hand had ruined it completely. It would never fire again.

DeVeeri hurled the useless gun straight at the *keth*, but the creature battled it easily away with a flick of one powerful arm. Then it heaved itself forward and began to come toward DeVeeri.

The knife in his hand was as useless as the damaged gun. No being with two arms could come close enough to a many-limbed *keth* to land a knife-blow and escape alive. Besides, the things were fantastically hard to kill. No single knife-wound would do it.

There was only one thing left to do. DeVeeri spun around and began to run through the twisted heaps of rocks, heading toward the ship.

**S**I X HOURS LATER, he didn't feel quite so confident. The great, glowing ball of Antares

seemed to fill half the sky with its crimson light, and it seemed to DeVeeri that there had never been anything else except the evil, bloody landscape and the unearthly monster that pursued him. He knew that it was only his spacesuit which had kept him alive this long. The sweet, oxygen-rich air that the tanks fed into the helmet, the cool water and the food concentrate in his chest pack, were all that kept him moving for four days. But water and food were running short.

How far to his spaceship? He glanced at his wrist compass and checked his bearings against the swollen sun. Too far. Another five hours, at the least.

"It's a rough life," said the voice of Darius. "I'm glad I'm built into a wall of this ship. It's less strenuous that way."

"Thanks for the encouragement," DeVeeri said. He wondered whether he preferred utter silence to the occasional inane comments of the computer, and decided that poor company was better than none at all. At least having the robot to talk to took his mind off the struggle at hand.

He had had to land the scout ship a long way from the Vegan observation post in order to keep from being detected by the alien's instruments. The walk to the out-

post had seemed leisurely and easy. He had had nothing to fear except detection, and the chances of that had been remote. But now he had been living in his suit for twelve days, and had been running, dodging, and going without sleep for a third of that time. He had made much better time returning, but he had done it by moving night and day.

And behind him, moving with the inexorable determination of a machine, came the *keth*.

The death of its master meant nothing to it, DeVeeri knew. It did not have any more nor any less determination than before. It did not hate the Earthman; it was merely following the order that had been engraved into its pseudo-intelligent brain, the one thought that lived in its mind: *hunt, find, and kill*. As long as its synthetic life kept it moving, it would attempt to follow that order.

There was nothing DeVeeri could do but keep moving. If the *keth* caught up with him, the dead Vegan would still have the last grim smile.

Desperately, he forced his legs onward, the Lieutenant kept trying to think of ways to kill the *keth*. He rejected the idea of a pitfall; that wouldn't work a second time. The machine-like brain of the monster had recorded

the last trap and would be on guard against any similar attempts on its life. Except for his knife, DeVeeri was unarmed -- and the knife was worthless.

"Why didn't I come in full space armor?" he asked out loud. "Why did I come out this way?" Even the brutal, terrible strength of a *keth* couldn't have pierced the vodium plates of full armor.

"You had to go out that way," Darius reminded him. "Full armor is so heavy it needs motors to run it -- and the Vegans would have detected the motors."

"You're right," DeVeeri said. He'd done it the only way he could; he'd have to make the best of it without armor.

AS HE SLOGGED onward through the rocky desert, he knew that the *keth* was catching up, slowly but relentlessly. He envied the computer, snug and motionless back in the little ship. It took every ounce of will power and strength he possessed just to put one foot in front of another and keep on going.

He started to go up a long, crested dune that lay in his way, and saw something flicker in the corner of his eye. He turned, ready to fight -- but there was nothing there. Nothing but heat waves dancing in the blood-

red glare of the bloated sun above.

He seemed to hear something behind him, and he spun around, facing the way he had come. There was nothing there, either, except the long line of footprints that faded away toward the irregular horizon.

He turned back and kept on walking, putting one foot in front of the other, pushing his way through the soft sand for step after step after step.

*Boots! Boots! Boots! Boots!*

*Sloggin' up and down again—  
There's no discharge in the war!*

Kipling? Why was he reciting Kipling? He didn't know. All he knew was that he had to keep moving. Walk, walk, walk. Step, step, step. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot—

There was something ahead of him!

He stopped, reeling with the effort of keeping his balance, and peered through the crimson haze that danced in front of his eyes.

The *keth!* It had circled around!

He turned to run and found another *keth* facing him, its orange eyes glowing eerily in the Antarean glare.

He spun again, his legs getting tangled in the process. He went down on his knees.

There were monsters all around

him. All of them waiting, waiting for him to die.

He shouted raucously at them, but they didn't move. He tried to crawl away, but there was a *keth* waiting for him, no matter where he turned.

Then something happened to the sun. It began to darken, blotting out the landscape, leaving only the crouching beasts around him.

Then, they, too, were gone.

Lieutenant DeVeeri sank hesitantly to his knees in the sand. "Darius?" he asked weakly. "Darius are you still there?"

"I'm here," the robot said impassively.

"I - - think - - I'm - - going - - crazy," DeVeeri said brokenly. "I'm seeing things."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere," DeVeeri said. "I can't go any further."

"Don't say that," came the quick reply. "Get up and get moving. Come on, DeVeeri. Get up."

"I can't," the Lieutenant said. He leaned forward, his face getting closer to the warm sand. Then he slumped forward, face down, in the sand.

MUCH LATER, he awoke. He lifted his head and stared around, a little surprised to find himself still alive. Around him

were wind-eroded, sandblasted rocks, carved into queer shapes by the hot, acid winds that blew over the surface of Antares VII. The weirdly-shaped rocks had looked like *keths* to his fatigued, sleep-weary brain, but now he could see them for what they were.

He looked at the western horizon. Looming above it was a little more than half of the great star Antares. Its light was a deep red now, almost a purplish hue.

He hadn't slept long, he knew that. Suddenly, he pushed himself erect and stared around, trying to see in the dim red light.

*What had awakened him?*

Then he heard the noise again. He turned and looked down on the long line of dark footprints that led away toward the horizon.

And there, moving with deadly purpose, was the *keth*. It was less than fifty yards away, its many legs moving with inexorable precision toward him. And this time, he knew it was no illusion.

Fear and the strength of fear gave him the power to run. He didn't know where he was running to, and he didn't care, so long as it was somewhere away from the monstrous thing that was following him.

He ran until he suddenly slammed hard against a hard, rocky wall. He fell backwards, and the

stelplex bubble of his helmet clanged ringingly against a rock. The blow jarred a measure of sanity into his fogged brain. He jumped to his feet and looked around.

"Nice," he said bitterly. He was at the end of a long, narrow canyon, surrounded by rocky cliffs on every side. At the open end of the canyon, he could see the loathsome shape of the approaching *keth*.

There was only one way out of the dead-end canyon, and DeVeeri took it. He began climbing the cliff that blocked the end. Desperation lent strength to his muscles and agility to his fingers as he sought handholds in the rock face.

Up and up he climbed, until finally he came to a narrow ledge. It was only a few feet wide, and it was the end of his path. He couldn't possibly go any further. Above him, the sheer face of a precipice stretched with glassy smoothness. There was no handhold above him; he had nowhere to go but down -- and that meant climbing down to death.

"Haven't heard from you in a while," Darius said in his helmet-speaker. "Where are you?"

Quickly, explicitly, and profanely, DeVeeri outlined the situation. When he was finished, Darius' remark was equally concise:

"The situation doesn't look favorable."

DeVerri swore and peered over the edge of the cliff. Halfway up, crawling like some giant arachnid, came the *keth*.

Frantically, the Lieutenant looked around on the ledge. There was a handful of small rocks scattered around, and two big ones. He tried throwing some of the smaller ones, but the *keth* batted them away almost derisively.

Then he lifted a big one, nearly the size of his head, and dropped it toward the horror beneath. He saw the *keth's* multi-faceted eyes glimmer as they took in the situation, and then the beast moved aside with surprising agility. The rock plowed harmlessly into the soft sand beneath.

Lieutenant James DeVeeri had come, quite literally, to a dead end.

THEN, OUT OF the desperation of his mind, came an answer. It was risky, but it was better than the sure death that would overtake him when the *keth* reached the ledge.

He began to breathe deeply, charging his lungs with oxygen. He heard Darius say, "What's happening? Are you still alive?"

"I am. But I'm getting out of my suit, so don't bother asking any

more questions."

"You're *what*?" the robot asked, sounding about as excited as a computer could ever get. "Now I know you're carzy!"

Ignoring the robot's remarks, DeVeeri swiftly unzipped the airtight seal at the front of the suit and pulled it off in one quick motion.

His eyes stung as the acid fumes of the atmosphere bit into them, but by blinking them rapidly, he kept his vision fairly clear.

Still holding his breath, he zipped up the suit again and turned the air supply on high. The suit ballooned up as the pressure within it increased. As soon as it was full, he threw it high out over the edge of the cliff.

He heard it thump to the sand below. Then he waited a few seconds and peered over the edge. A smile crossed his face at the sight he beheld.

The *keth's* only knowledge of an Earthman was of his outside -- his suit. The *keth* had no way of knowing that the Earthman was no longer in the suit; so far as he was concerned, the suit *was* Earthman.

And so the *keth* had turned itself around and was painstakingly making its way back toward the ground.

DeVeeri picked up the sole re-

maining big rock and held it over the *keth*, a prayer on his lips. The *keth* had its back turned now, as it wound its torturous way back down the face of the cliff toward the empty, inflated spacesuit that lay on the sandy floor of the canyon.

Carefully, DeVeeri pulled his hands away from the heavy rock. It dropped rapidly, straight toward the unsuspecting *keth*.

With crushing force, it smashed into the rear of the ugly creature, carrying the hideous body with it to the base of the cliff. There was a sickening *squish!* as stone and monster hit the canyon floor.

The *keth* twitched feebly and died, its pseudo-life crushed out of it forever.

DeVeeri's chest ached from holding his breath, but he knew that he didn't dare breathe the corrosive gases that surrounded him. His eyes were streaming with tears as he tried to climb down the face of the cliff.

He almost made it, but three-quarters of the way down his breath exploded from his lungs, and a gulp of the hellish atmosphere went swirling down his

throat. He coughed and toppled to the sand below.

Gagging, choking, his skin itching from the acid atmosphere that hung heavily around him, he crawled painfully toward the spacesuit.

He just barely made it.

**A** ONE-MAN scout came screaming into Earth's atmosphere, and the Grand Base tractor beams barely caught it before it smashed into the ground.

The hospital ambulance roared across the field to where the ship lay, and two doctors entered the airlock. They heard the voice of the computer saying, 'We're here, DeVeeri, we're here! Come on, wake up!"

Lieutenant James DeVeeri was unconscious in the control seat, but when the doctor touched him, he opened his eyes.

"Can I see some yellow sunshine?" he asked. "Just some yellow sunshine?"

"Sure," said the doctor. "Sure you can, Lieutenant."

"Thanks," said DeVeeri, closing his eyes.

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# Letters from the Readers

## PROMOTING SCIENCE FICTION

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I don't know just how big the market is for science fiction, but I think I'm safe in saying it could be a whale of a lot bigger with some added push. And I can go on to say, the more readers, the more money—the better the stories! This is elementary, of course. And it is a fact that we need a little more genius and a lot less "slick" in this broad field.

Believe it or not, we, the fans and readers can at least double circulation for TALES, IMAGINATION, or any other stf magazine. Think of it this way. Most of the people we know do not read science fiction because they never have been introduced to it! Well, most of us have scads of (certainly a few) old issues laying around. We may not have as many friends, but as you will see, it will take just one! *If every one of us starts just one other person reading science fiction, then twice as many people will be fans—and the field is*

*doubled!*

The advantage to us readers will be, as I said, more money to the magazines to buy better stories, and artwork, etc. Man, this thing could really snowball—think of Hemingway et al turning to science fiction writing because it suddenly paid that well!

Seriously though, I truly believe readers can promote science fiction in this way. It certainly is no trouble to merely show some of our friends a good sampling of what science fiction is.

No, I'm not getting paid for this!

Alan Moore  
2707-A Speedway  
Austin, Texas

*Needless to say, Al, we heartily agree with you. Matter of fact we think your idea is nothing short of terrific! Big point is, don't just show a friend a copy of TALES, or whatever other magazine you may choose, see to it that the friend actually reads the issue! Once he reads science fiction the chances are he'll be hooked! How about*

it, gang? . . . . . wlh

### STF INTEREST RESTORED

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have a copy of the July issue of TALES at hand. I must say that it is better than any other science fiction I have read. This includes *Astounding*, *Galaxy*, *If*, and a few others.

I had actually given up my interest in the field until I read this issue. If other issues of TALES and your companion magazine IMAGINATION are as good you have nothing to worry about as far as this reader is concerned.

If possible I'd like to see some of Arthur C. Clarke's work in your magazines. I worked at the radar place where Clarke was in England during the war. If you have his current address I'd sure like to have it.

Keep up the good work.

Robert E. Todd  
Kenton, Tenn.

Rest assured that both Madge and Tales will give you the best stf reading possible. Sorry, we don't have Clarke's current address, but perhaps somebody who reads this will get in touch with you on the matter . . . . . wlh

### SMALL AUTHORS— BIG STORIES!

Dear Bill:

First I want to say I like TALES. I like it a lot. As a matter of fact, TALES and *Other Worlds* are the only stf magazines I will regularly pay 35c for! Reason being that both mags have the kind of science fiction I like to

read. A lot of good excitement and thrills in every story—none of the sociological junk some of the other books feature.

Two things in particular about TALES that I like: SCIENTI-FILM MARQUEE, and the cartoons. Especially the former. Ackerman does a good job. On the fiction side you don't have "big name" writers, but you do have BIG stories. The author can be a nobody to me, but if I like his work I'll follow him. Which adds up simply to the fact that a writer who is a nobody before becomes a somebody darn quick!

Keep the stories BIG.

Ron Haydock  
4212 Oak Ave.  
Brookfield, Ill.

One of the first editorial lessons we ever learned—and from Ray Palmer, editor of OTHER WORLDS—was that a "big name" meant nothing, it's always the story that counts! Ray will be pleased to hear you like his magazine so much, just as we are that TALES also heads your list. But one point of inquiry, what about IMAGINATION? Our companion book is just as good as TALES, so give it a whirl . . . . . wlh

### BELOW PAR ISSUE . . . ?

Dear Bill:

The July issue of Tales was the first I've been able to buy on the local stands for some time now. I wasn't particularly happy with what's been happening since the last issue I got. First of all, the cover by Lloyd Rognan is almost as bad as the one he did for last November's

issue, and that was in a class of inferiority all by itself!

It's becoming plain to me that Rognan just isn't capable of painting a realistic robot . . . his covers depicting human beings are usually very good, but his mechanical men are amateurish and awkward. What in Ghu's name has happened to McCauley? He was once your No. 1 cover artist!

The lead novel, *THUNDER WORLD* by Edmond Hamilton, is not in this author's best vein by any means. I found no "sense of wonder" in this story—the thing you seem hell-bent to shove at us readers. I doubt if many other readers found it either.

The rest of the fiction fared little better from my viewpoint. *FIELD TRIP* by Darius John Granger was too contrived . . . even for stf! *THE MAN WITHOUT A PLANET* by Adam Chase began well, but ended poorly. *SPACE TRAVELER'S REVENGE* was mildly humorous, but that's about all. *FLIGHT OF THE ARK II* possessed the best idea in the issue, but it was woefully underdeveloped. Could have stood 20,000 words for expansion! *JASON & THE MAKER*, on the other hand, had no idea whatsoever. All in all, a remarkably poor fiction content for July.

Cartoons are fine, and Ackerman's *SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE* column is interesting and informative . . . but let's face it, *TALES* is a science fiction magazine and if the fiction fails the issue is a flop! I certainly hope you'll start to show improvement.

Kenn Curtis

4722 Peabody Ave.  
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

*Sorry the July number failed to click with you, Kenn. But we can't agree with you about the lead story in particular. Ed Hamilton got a neat sense of wonder into *THUNDER WORLD*. What, pray tell do you think a sense of wonder should include? . . . . . wlh*

#### TOP NOVEL

Dear Bill Hamling:

I think the July *TALES* was one of the best stf magazines on the market. To start off, I thought the Rognan cover was good—as a matter of fact it sparked my interest to buy the issue! Then I got around to reading *THUNDER WORLD* by Edmond Hamilton. This novel was exceptionally good. Ed Hamilton is now one of my favorite writers!

I've noted that your subscription rate is quite low compared to other magazines in the field, so pretty soon I'm going to take advantage of your low rate and the free book offer!

John Morton  
Wallingford, Pa.

*The sub rate to both *TALES* and *MADGE* is the lowest you'll find, and besides, we give you your choice of one or all of three top-notch hard-cover books as a bonus. It's a combination you can't afford to pass up—we hope! How about everybody who hasn't subscribed up until now turning to page 130 and joining the gang officially . . . wlh*

#### SOPHISTI-NONSENSE

Dear Mr. Hamling:

What's this about "sophisticated, mature readers of *Astounding* and *Galaxy*"? I'm 14 and I never miss an issue of either! Surely I'm no highbrow! I can't see the reasoning behind Janice Jacobson's letter in the July issue. How about Eric Frank Russell, Robert Heinlein, Bob Sheckley, Murray Leinster, etc.? Does she call them "sophisticated"? They just write high grade action stories, mostly. Sure the stories make you think a little, but they're good. For me, the highbrow magazine is F&SF, which I can't stand.

How do you have the nerve to call something fiction, and in the same issue advertise it as true, as you did with **THE SECRET OF THE SAUCERS?**

Keep both TALES and MADGE up to their present standards and I'll keep buying them!

Roger Ebert  
410 E. Washington  
Urbana, Ill.

Certainly there's nothing wrong with a science fiction story making you stop and think. After all, that's what makes science fiction the in-

teresting branch of literature that it is! And as long as the story itself has enough pace and action to hold and entertain—it's a good story. We feel Janice was referring to the type of yarn so prevalent which made you feel like the guy squatting in a box, arms folded, saying: "People are no damned good!" Science fiction is adventure into infinity—not onto a psychiatrist's couch! . . . Who is to say whether the saucers are fiction or fact? You can believe either way but nobody can prove a thing. So why not say it's both? . . . Which about winds up shop for this issue, except to say that we hope you'll take just a minute to turn the page and fill out the coupon you'll find there. We want your subscription and you'll certainly not only want to receive each and every issue but a nice stf book to add to your library shelf. If by chance you already have the books offered, subscribe anyway—and give the book to a friend! That's another way to help promote science fiction! See you next issue . . . . wlh

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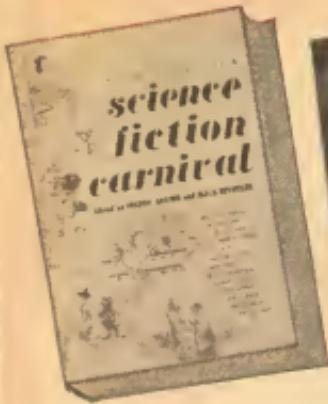
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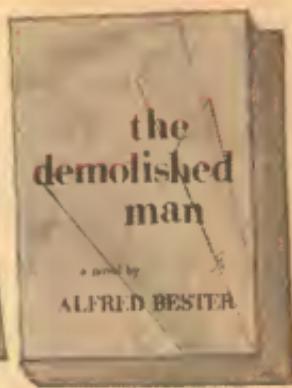
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